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OR,
A "DAISY" BLUFF.
A CALIFORNIA ROMANCE.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "BOWIE," "THREE OF A KIND,"
"ALWAYS ON HAND," "TIGER DICK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
"BLUFF."

"Who are you, fellow? And what is the meaning of this intrusion into my private office?"
"Go slow, gov'nor! I've come on business; and you bet I'm hyer to stay!"

The scene is an office of elegant appointments; carpeting, frescoing, paper-hanging in gilt, upholstery in russet leather.

A plate-glass window reaching to the floor looks out upon Montgomery street, in the commercial center of the Occidental metropolis.

To secure privacy, when desired, from the gaze of the passers in the street, a green velvet curtain slides on a highly-polished brass rod across the lower half of the window.

Of the first speaker, Colonel Wallingford, a

"GO SLOW, GOV'NOR! I'VE COME ON BUSINESS; AND YOU BET I'M HYER TO STAY!"

man in middle life, and the proprietor of these luxurious surroundings, it is enough to say: that he has a bloodless, "white-livered" look; that his eyes are too close set; that the very carriage of his body is cringing and deprecatory; that he habitually wears a fawning smirk; that even now, in the height of his anger, his voice lacks the sonorous ring of righteous and fearless indignation.

There you have him—an apology for an honest man!

This pusillanimity is doubtless the occasion of the contemptuous bravado of the fellow who has thrown himself loungingly into one easy-chair, crossed his top-booted feet in the seat of another, and spit a stream of tobacco-juice at the polished bronze knob that surmounts one of the fire-dogs.

Spareness of flesh makes Sidney Sloper—or Silver Rifle Sid, as "the boys" call him—appear what is jocularly known as "slab-sided" and "lantern-jawed;" but the former peculiarity is redeemed by a lithe, athletic grace, and the latter by that flexibility of face which gives a wide range of expression.

His skin is dark, yet perfectly clear and smooth; his hair and mustache, raven black; and this brunette setting gives to his large black eyes a glance of deadly intensity.

His dress is "gay," even "gaudy"—a dove-colored slouch hat, a sack coat of black velvet, a ruffled shirt with a broad turn-over collar, worn open at the throat and fastened at the first button-hole in the bosom with a diamond stud, the whole set off by a device peculiar to the southern mining districts—a silk handkerchief of pale rose tint tied about the body, over one shoulder and under the opposite arm; finally, a broad belt of white buckskin, with a square clasp-buckle, supporting corduroy trousers that matched his hat in color, tucked into the tops of morocco-legged riding boots, armed with huge, jingling Mexican spurs.

Of weapons, only the ivory hilt of a bowie-knife is visible, directly in front.

Let him push his hat back on his head, and thrust his hands deep in his pockets, with a sigh of comfort; and there you have him—the embodiment of "Bluff," taking his lordly ease!

"Confound your insolence!" cried his outraged host. "I'll have you thrown into the street!"

And he reached to touch a bell and summon one better fitted than himself for such work.

The intruder merely turned his head, to fix his eyes on the hand that hovered over the bell-tap.

That look, so coolly indifferent as to consequences, unnerved the gentleman. He reconsidered his purpose of calling another upon the scene.

Silver Rifle Sid smiled at the effect of his "bluff."

"Oh, no!—I wouldn't!" he drawled. "Thar's leetle matters o' business of so peculiar a character, that the fewer parties concerned the handier it is to arrange 'em satisfactory all round! Come to think, I wouldn't, now!"

And carelessly clinking some coins in his pocket, he turned and aimed another tobacco-juice projectile at the knob of the fire-dog.

"Do you think I will submit to be browbeaten like this in my own office?" cried Colonel Wallingford.

But his voice, independent of his stopping to parley, showed that he had begun to "weaken."

Again Silver Rifle Sid turned so as to look over his shoulder, this time fixing his gaze upon the face of his involuntary host.

"Pard," he said, slowly and distinctly, "will you give a moment's examination to my optic?—the right one, if you please. Do you see anything verdant in that crystalline orb? Do you think that a man o' my make spreads himself out in this kind of shape without holding some o' the cards that call loud for money? Ef you allow it's a clean bluff, and you've got the sand to back your opinion, jump in all over. Maybe you want somebody by when we show up all round the board, and then ag'in, maybe you don't!"

Having thrown down this gage, the speaker kept his eyes upon the face of the man he had challenged.

A dark purple flush rose to Colonel Wallingford's brow, and receded, leaving him livid. His eyes ran over the outstretched figure before him, and then wandered uneasily to the window.

"If you really have business with me," he said, almost pleadingly, "cannot you deport yourself in a little more gen—a little less conspicuous manner?"

Silver Rifle Sid turned his face once more to the fireplace, rolled his quid into the other cheek, and said, with a careless thrust of his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the window:

"Slide the curtain, if you don't want to admit the general public to the circus."

After a moment's struggle, in which his fears mastered his pride, Colonel Wallingford walked to the window and drew the curtain with a trembling hand. Then, returning to his desk, he stood irresolute, gazing apprehensively at the man who coolly sat with his back to him.

"Sit down! sit down!" said Sid, with an off-hand patronage that was most exasperating.

"Before we're through with it you will probably feel the need of these luxurious chairs more than you ever did before in all your life."

Colonel Wallingford sunk into his seat with a gray pallor on his face.

"What do you want with me?" he asked, dogged defiance appearing in look and tone.

But Silver Rifle Sid was not yet quite ready for business.

"Sorry I can't offer you a cigar," he began, thrusting his hand into an inside pocket of his coat.

"Allow me!" said the colonel, taking the hint, and pushing a cigar-stand toward him.

"Ah! thanks," and Sid helped himself placidly.

And when he had inhaled the smoke and blown it out through his nostrils:

"I must commend your taste, my dear sir. For delicacy of flavor, this is unsurpassed."

"If you will state your business, briefly and at once, I shall be obliged to you."

"Some men can scarcely find time for the hangman. For my part, I think it conducive to length of life, certainly to comfort, to take the world a little more leisurely."

Colonel Wallingford winced at this reference to the hangman. Involuntarily, almost unconsciously, his hand wandered toward a certain drawer in his desk which contained a loaded revolver, and then, with infirmity of purpose, was drawn back and carried tremulously to his lips.

"It's a long story," said Sid, finally. "It takes me back to—let me see! 'Fifty—fifty—three?—two?—no, earlier than that; fifty-one, as I'm a living sinner! August 27, 1851, Nearly sixteen years ago to a day! Dear! dear! how time *does* fly!"

At mention of the date Colonel Wallingford shuddered and closed his hand hard over the hilt of a mother-of-pearl paper-knife made in the form of a dagger.

Silver Rifle Sid smoked on in silence, musing dreamily on the flight of time.

"It was down in the southern mining district," he began, presently. "Walt Caswell was a gentleman, born and bred; his wife was a sweet a leetle woman as ever stood in shoe-leather; and their kid was a sunbeam for pretty and gay."

"Walt had a pard— But, thar! you can make up your mind about him later on. Call him Matt Corey, and let it go at that."

"Lastly, they hired a bummer that went by the handle of Whisky Skin—a good-hearted fellow when he was half-shot, which was about all the time; but a liar and a thief and anything else that he had the sand to be."

"Thar was jest one thing that the galoot had a weakness for next to the bottle; and that was little Cassie Caswell. But he had an ornery way o' showing his notion for the child, and that's a fact. One day they ketched him giving her sly nips out of his bottle, and laughing at the wry faces she made over it."

"Well, to cut a long story short, they sunk a hole in the ground a hundred feet or more, until they struck a little paradise down thar on hard-pan. Then they put on more hands, and went to coyoting in all directions; and wound up as a good many have done before and since—with oceans of mine, but nary color. The original three stood up with their hands in their pockets—dead-broke!"

"Caswell swore to the last that thar was big money in that hole. He borrowed until his credit was nix; then he tried to ring somebody in, to keep him and his family in grub until he struck their luck; but the boys told him to take in his sign."

"On the sly, though, they left flour and bacon, and a mite o' coffee and sugar now and ag'in, so's that leetle woman and kid shouldn't go actually hungry, while they tried to persuade Caswell to knock off and break ground in a new spot."

"Then came a tremendous rumpus up at the Little Cassie Mine. Corey came running into Silver Rifle with a bloody knife in his hand, and a bad cut jest above his left shoulder-blade, and another in his hip. A worse-scared man you never see. He was livid around the gills, and his teeth chattered, and his knees jest give out under him."

"The knife belonged to Whisky Skin—all the boys knowed that."

"Corey said that the bummer had been growling for days, and that morning he had made a stand, allowing that he was tired of beating his whisky, when he ought to have the dust to plank along 'o the best of 'em, bein's as he'd 'arnt it twenty times over."

"Corey allowed that he wasn't the boss, and he couldn't make nothing out of him. More'n that, he knowed well enough that Caswell hadn't a show of color; so he might howl, but he couldn't draw blood from a stone."

"After a good deal of back slack, Whisky Skin went off, swearing that he'd have blood out of something, if he didn't git enough to pay for three fingers now and ag'in, like a white man."

"The next Corey heard was down in the mine. Each of 'em was off by himself, coyoting at the far end of a separate drift, so's to strike luck

ef, thar was any tharabout, when Corey heard a screeching that made his hair rise.

"He drops his pick and runs toward the shaft; and thar he sees Mrs. Caswell flying out of the drift whar he knowed her husband had been at work, and she screaming help! help! help! And after her comes Whisky Skin, looking wild, as if the very devil was after him; and when he sees Corey, he outs pistol and drops her in her tracks."

"Then Corey seen that the bummer had a bloody knife in his hand; and he allowed that he had had a bout with Caswell; and the leetle woman—Lord love her! he reckoned she'd come down to bring her man a drink o' cold tea or the like—had dropped onto him in the midst of his bloody work."

"Well, according to his say-so, Corey jumps for the murderer, and they have it rough and tumble. He drops his own knife in scratching to git it out of his belt; then comes the clinch; he gits the steel into his back the Lord knows how many times; but in the end he disarms Whisky Skin, socks his own bowie into him, and downs him; then, feeling that he has lost too much blood to risk any further tussle, he cuts and runs."

"Well, the boys made a blue streak for that mine. When they came in sight, they see Whisky Skin making off with—what do you think? Little Cassie in his arms! The heart's blood of both her parents yet warm on his hands, and she with her innocent little arms about his neck!"

"Didn't the boys git up and howl! If they could only have filled his skin full of lead, without risk of hitting the kid! But he had his start, and kept it in spite of their teeth, making straight for the river. When he came to the canyon, he never stopped, but jumped clean off, and went down like a plummet, sock into the water, fifty feet if an inch."

"You'd better believe thar was men on that cliff white around the gills and almost afraid to look down. To drop your man at a pinch—that's one thing. But to drown a three-year-old baby like a rat in a bucket!"

"The bummer had struck the river at the foot of a shute, whar the water had scooped out a deep hole; then comes a riffle, not four rods long, and the whole outfit goes down into the ground with a swirl."

"He came up with Little Cassie yet in his arms; and the pretty one squealed with fright. The bummer looked up at the boys, and without so much as a word or a sound swum into the riffle; then down he went with a scud—him and the little one—took three lightning turns round the whirlpool; the baby gave one more scream; and—

"Eh, pard? It's gitting too much for ye, I reckon."

Colonel Wallingford had dropped his face upon his arm, on his desk. His labored breathing, the swelling of the veins in his neck, and the clinching of his hands until it seemed as if the nails must cut into the palms, showed the convulsion that was going on within him.

A low, muffled cry of anguish had brought the narrative to a halt.

"Tender heart!" said Sid, looking at him through contracted eyelids. "Can't listen to the touchin' tale without sheddin' a silent tear! I sympathize with ye, pardner; I'm some that way myself."

"And thar was Matt Corey—he was tender-hearted, too. You jest ought to have seen him on his knees, staring down into that thar canyon, with his hands clutching the rocks, and the cold sweat starting from every pore. The boys had to pick him up bodily and carry him back to the shanty. He set thar and shuddered, and shivered, and cried like a woman with the high-strikes. And he asked the boys if they thought the Lord would ever forgive him for not hanging on to Whisky Skin when he had him down thar in the mine, before he got his murderous hands on Little Cassie."

"Well, they buried Caswell and his good lady in the same grave; but, as for Whisky Skin and Little Cassie, they were down in the Devil's Stirabout, fixed for the judgment."

"Corey allowed that thar wasn't anything to be got out of that hole in the ground: but, bein's as his pard had stuck to his idee to the end, the work shouldn't stop the minute he was under ground. So he let himself out now and ag'in, long enough to keep himself in grub; and pegged away down thar all by himself."

"He kept the thing up for a month, a-gitting more and more melancholic all the while. He got thin and wild eyed, and that skeery he'd jump half out of his boots if you clapped him on the back unexpected. The boys allowed he'd go crack-brained, staying down thar all along of Caswell's ghost; but he said it was a comfort to him."

"He might 'a' stuck it out till he was gibbering mad; but one day thar was a slip in the shaft, and more tons of earth fell in thar than you'd think a sensible man would dig out for all the gold between thar and China."

"Then Corey give it up; and after hanging around the camp for a while with his hands in his pockets, as if he hadn't the heart for anything, he allowed he'd git out and go down to

the Bay. The boys said he might pick up some flat in Frisco, and sell the mine and the buyer in the same transaction; and he allowed he wouldn't throw the chance over his shoulder. Anyway, he was bound for the States.

"When he set out, a whole raft of the fellers went a piece with him—five miles if a step—to give him a send-off; and they took his hand, and allowed they'd liever part with more'n one saloot in that camp. 'Twa'n't every man that would stand by his pard's idee like that, and his pard as dead as Julius Caesar, whar it couldn't do him no manner o' good.

"Well, he did sell that mine. You'd ought to know that, colonel, since you're the lucky sport that put your money up on that blind. You wa'n't no miner yourself; but you sent a superintendent and a gang o' men down to the Riffle, and they opened 'er up; and right whar Caswell had driven his last pick into the rock, thar they found the missin' seam; and a pretty little fortune they took out of it, too. These hyar fire-dogs have the glint of that gold on 'em!"

And once more Silver Riffle Sid spit a stream of tobacco-juice at the brass knob.

Then he turned his head to look over his shoulder, and what he saw was enough to shake nerves less thoroughly trained than his.

With his left hand still clutching the hilt of the dagger-shaped paper-knife, and in his right a cocked revolver which was by no means such a toy, Colonel Wallingford leaned over his desk, his eyes round with a wolfish glare, his face bloodless, his set teeth grinning between quivering lips, and his hair—it almost seemed—on end.

"Who are you?" he hissed. "What are you here for?"

CHAPTER II.

THE GRAVE GIVES UP ITS DEAD.

SILVER RIFFLE SID looked the frenzied man coolly in the face, his own countenance as impassive as when he saw his last dollar swept away by the turn of a card.

"Oh, no! I wouldn't!" he said, with a drawl. "Pst!"

And he thrust his thumb upward, back of his left ear—a pantomime the significance of which needed no interpretation.

Then he went on in the same tone:

"One's enough; two's a plenty; three's a crowd; but four— Don't be a hog!"

A shudder ran through Colonel Wallingford's frame; and his nerveless hand relaxed on the butt of his revolver so that the weapon slipped in his grasp, and its muzzle struck the top of the desk with a sharp thud.

Sid nonchalantly turned his face again to the fireplace.

"Who are you?" once more gasped the colonel, a dull despair now looking out of his eyes at the crown of the hat just visible over the back of the chair in which Sid sat.

"If you are inquiring into my pedigree," replied Sid, "that's a conundrum I gave up long ago. If your memory goes back to eighteen hundred and fifty-one, you may recall a young hopeful of thirteen tender years, who one day stood with a hundred dollars in gold displayed on the head of a whisky barrel in the streets of Frisco, inviting the passers-by to pitch chuck-a-luck, in the sweetest and most persuasive accents he could command.

"A greeny fresh from the States chipped in; and from the start the knowing youth played him for a gudgeon. It was so easy it was almost a shame to do it. When he was a hundred out he began to sweat like a boss, and at a hundred and fifty he tried to grab the pot. But our young banker had been thar before. He called on a pair of sixes, and the hog passed."

Sid meant to say that the grabbing had been stopped by a brace of revolvers.

"The banker," he went on, "was yer humble sarvant; the greeny was—Matt Corey!"

"Our young adventurer next turns up at Silver Riffle. For all he had cut his eye-teeth in some things, thar was enough of the boy about him yet so that the chance to prowl about underground was better to him than grub or money. He got into the Little Cassie Mine through an abandoned drift, and used to play Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. As luck would have it, he was in thar on the day when Walt Caswell was rubbed out."

And now the manner of the narrator changed. He—Sid—rose to his feet and faced about, fixing his piercing gaze upon the cowering wretch before him.

Colonel Wallingford had fallen back in his chair, and sat grasping the arms with tremulous hands, his jaw dropped, his eyes staring.

"I saw a man pecking away as if he was coining his sweat into gold," pursued Sid: "and as I looked at him he struck the color from the rock. When he knew that his luck had come to him at last, and that he held in his hand what would chase the look of anxiety from the eyes he loved so well and bring back the color to the cheeks that had begun to feel cold to his kisses, he sat down as weak as a child, and great tears rolled silently down his cheeks.

"But that was all changed when another came down the drift and joined him. He set up a shout and grabbed the new-comer, and

fairly dragged him to the spot, talking wild of the fortune that lay thar waiting for the blast and pick.

"He proved his case only too well. Need I tell you how the greed glowed in the eyes of his listener?—how it came to him that, they two only of all the world knowing of that thing, with one out of the way the other might have it all to himself?—how like a flash he struck, then sprung upon his victim, socking the steel into him again and again and again, grinding his teeth and snarling like a wild beast in his rage?—how he heard some one coming down the drift, and crouched with chattering teeth, blowing out Caswell's candle, but in his panic seeming to forget his own?—how the woman came upon that hellish sight, and ran shrieking away, he leaping after her like the fiend he was?

"Why didn't I, who had proved myself so handy with shooting-irons, stop the thing? I lost my head, that's why. Remember, I was only a boy. I knew that I was where I had no business to be, and I thought that if it was known that I was there I might run my chance for the halter. Caswell was dead before I could have helped him, and that woman's shriek knocked the little presence of mind I had left. I broke and ran headlong down the drift in the darkness."

"Well, well!" cried Colonel Wallingford, with the petulance of a man who is the victim of a trifling annoyance, "what do you want? What are you here for? If it is money—"

"I'll talk to a better man than you about that. Send for your lawyer."

"But—but," gasped the colonel, in wild alarm, "you're not going to tell this story to him?"

"And hang the goose that lays my golden eggs?"

"But there is no need of a lawyer. You will find me a reasonable man to deal with."

"No doubt," said Sid, dryly. "But I generally play my own game in my own way. Send for your lawyer. And one word of advice—don't show that face in your outer office."

The shivering wretch went meekly to an innocent-looking cabinet, took therefrom a less innocent-looking decanter, and poured a bumper of its contents down his throat without winking.

It brought the color back to his livid cheeks; and stepping to the door, he sent a messenger for his lawyer.

That gentleman made his appearance in radiant good-humor. He was of comfortable girth, and as fair and rosy as if an alderman's dinner would sit on his stomach as lightly as theascalities incident to his profession sat on his conscience.

"My dear sir!" he cried, as he bustled in, and grasped the hand of the mining magnate.

Then he glanced at Sid without the change of a line in his face.

"Mr. Gower, this is Mr.— I beg your pardon!" said the colonel, balking over Sid's name.

"Sloper," said Sid, without taking the trouble to rise, and acknowledging the introduction with only a careless nod. "Glad to see you, sir."

"My lawyer," added the colonel, with evident uneasiness.

Then to Gower, with a deprecating smirk:

"Mr. Sloper has a little matter of business to talk over."

"I attend you, sir," said the lawyer, seating himself.

Silver Riffle Sid squared round, and coolly looked his man over.

"I understand that you have represented our friend hyer in a lawsuit which has been before the courts for a matter of four or five years."

"Champney versus Wallingford," assented Gower.

"You have handled the case in a way that does credit to you—as a lawyer?"

"I have looked after the interests of my client to the best of my ability."

"Exactly!—without regard to the equity of the case. However, in law, that's the other fellow's lookout. The case, as I understand it, is this:

"Colonel Wallingford's title to the Lucky Venture—one time Little Cassie—Mine, has been contested by a lady who urges her claim to Walter Caswell's share, as his niece and only surviving heir. The trial of the case was staved off by legal chicanery for two years, to be adjudged in her favor by the first jury that got a chance at it, since it requires little law to see that Matt Corey could not transfer more than belonged to him. But for three years longer you have kept it knocking from pillar to post on appeal. Of course your leetle game is to wear out the lady's pluck, and so force her to a compromise, by showing her that she will probably die of old age, if she waits for the intricacies of the law to be exhausted."

"I need not remind you that there are always two sides to a question," said the lawyer, blandly, "which look different according to the point of view. You have stated—may I venture to say your side?"

"The view of an outsider. Stick a pin thar!" said Sid, a little shortly.

"A sore spot!" reflected Gower, shrewdly. "Good! I may be able to work him yet."

"Now," pursued Sid, "you seem to be about at the end of your legal tether. Nothing remains but an appraisal of her due and the execution of judgment."

"There's many a slip— You know the adage," smiled Gower, with the air of a man in nowise daunted. "Miss Champney may yet come to see that we have made her a very fair offer, all things considered."

"Come! come!" cried Sid. "You're mighty shrewd, but you don't seem to know a business man when you see him. Do I look like a sneaking pettifogger who would come fiddling around with a two-penny trap, to coax you to put your foot into it? You're in the last ditch, and you know it as well as I do—"

"One moment, Mr. Sloper!" interrupted the lawyer.

"My dear colonel," he continued, "isn't this rather dry work? No living man could quarrel over such wine as you have in your sideboard—I know from experience. Will you allow me?"

And without further ceremony he went to the cabinet and took out a wine-set—long-necked decanters, and glasses apparently as thin as soap-bubbles.

Colonel Wallingford apologized for his want of hospitality.

The lawyer, the embodiment of smiling blandness, poured the wine and pledged Silver Riffle Sid:

"To our better acquaintance, sir! I begin to see that I haven't half appreciated you."

"It is a renewal of old memories between the colonel and myself," said Sid, with a sly glance at Wallingford out of the corner of his eye.

The mining magnate smirked and bowed.

"And now to business!" said Gower, squaring himself round. "What have you to offer us?"

"The true heiress," said Sid, quietly.

"The—what?" asked Gower, as if he feared that he had not heard aright.

"Can't I make myself clear? Walter Caswell's daughter."

"The Little Cassie of my narrative"—bowing to Colonel Wallingford.

That gentleman fell back in his chair, and his jaw dropped.

Sid toyed with his wine-glass, as if unconscious of the bomb he had dropped into his camp.

"But, my dear sir," said the lawyer, with an incredulous smile, "do you mean to tell us that the child has come back from the Devil's Stir-about?"

"Quite the contrary. If I am rightly informed, she made her re-entrance upon the stage of this wicked world through the mouth of a cave, half a mile or so from the point of her melodramatic exit. I have just been telling the colonel that the bumper had a weakness for the kid. He happened to know what others did not—that the Creek, after going down in the sink-hole, ran through a cave. I reckon he took long chances when he jumped in thar; but it was make or break with him. A mining-camp mob ain't the loveliest spectacle in the world, looking over yer shoulder at it. At any rate, he's alive to-day, and taking his three fingers straight, whenever he can git 'em."

"It is surprising," said the lawyer slowly, "what a power to fetch people out of the grave a million or so has. Of course I can see the advantage of this new complication to us. These questions of identity often drag out half a lifetime."

"That's a wrong lead, pard. It sometimes pays to play a square game. The girl herself's the best you've got—take my word for it."

"H'm!" mused the lawyer; and then abruptly:

"Why has she not come forward before this?"

"You might have guessed that. She has probably never so much as heard the name of Caswell."

"Ah!" cried Gower, brightening instantly.

"The bumper dares not tell of her paternity. If, then, we could get at these parties, effect a compromise with them, and non-suit La Blanchette! Where is this treasure-trove? I will not pretend to deny that she is worth a little something to us."

For the first time Silver Riffle Sid hesitated. For a moment there was a far-away look in his eyes, and he changed color perceptibly. Then his face hardened.

"What's the meaning of that?" mused the lawyer. "This chap is doing something desperate."

"Almost within stone-throw of the Lucky Venture," said Sid, in clear, hard tones.

"At Silver Riffle?" cried Colonel Wallingford, involuntarily.

"You might have seen her, but that, I believe, you have never visited your property."

"It was wholly unnecessary," replied the colonel, hastily. "I know nothing about mining; and I can trust my overseer."

Gower looked curiously at his client. Here was a—to him—new, and certainly very odd fact. And that sickly smile?

"Is none of my business," he reflected. "He don't pay me to help carry his burdens; and I reckon I have enough of my own not to seek more gratuitously."

Silver Riffle Sid then gave a more particular

description of the girl, all of which will be laid before the reader in its proper connection.

"By the way," he said, in conclusion, "I may be in need of some odd change in a day or two. Suppose, colonel, you make me a slight advance."

Without a word of demur Colonel Wallingford took his check-book from his safe, and prepared to fill it out.

"Don't trouble yourself about the amount," said Sid, coolly. "Your signature is the important thing."

"A blank check?" gasped the mining magnate.

Gower seemed to draw himself into his shell, as watchful as a hawk.

"I haven't determined what sum I may have use for," said Sid, as if this were a matter of little importance.

Colonel Wallingford sat still, with a far-away look in his eye, for a moment; and then seeming to come to a determination, he silently wrote his signature, tore out the check, and handed it to this cool extorter.

"Thanks!" said Sid, glancing at the writing. "It is a little shaky; but there can be no question as to its genuineness. I wish you may succeed in making fair terms with Miss Caswell. I may see you later. Good-morning!"

And he coolly walked out of the office.

But as he crossed the threshold, he ground his teeth with this curious internal objurgation:

"I'm an infernal fool, and I know it!"

CHAPTER III.

AT CROSS-PURPOSES.

THAT night Silver Riffle Sid sat on a rustic settee in the garden of a beautiful suburban village, gnawing his mustache and glaring at the illuminated windows of the house, when he suddenly became conscious of a subtle perfume in the air; and at the same instant his eyes were closed by the pressure of soft, warm fingers.

With an ejaculation of angry surprise, he tore the hands away, leaped to his feet, and wheeled round.

He was greeted by a laugh as sweet as the lips between which it rippled; and his resentment was challenged by the sauciest eyes that ever set a heart aflutter.

They were of the cerulean blue which is in keeping only with gold-blond hair and waxen complexion; and their owner was a diminutive creature, considerably under five feet high, with the plumpness and softness of a kitten.

She was the plaintiff in the suit of Champney vs. Wallingford, and was well named Blanche. Professionally—that is to say, across the footlights—she was known as La Blanchette.

"A most romantic time you're having out here—watching under my window, as I live!" she cried, teasingly. "Are you playing Romeo or Othello this evening?"

"This may be a joke to you; but you may bet your sweet life it's no joke to me!"

"Come! come, Sid! if your wrath were unappeasable, you wouldn't be here—you know you wouldn't. Being here, of course you have come to give me a chance to coax you up. As I am perfectly willing to humor you, why shouldn't we make short work of it? Come! it's a whack!"

And she held out her hand, laughing at the language in which she had couched her overtures.

"Thank you!" said Sid, sulkily. "You have played me for a gudgeon about as long as even you can. I've come here to give you a piece of my mind—"

"Don't! Keep your mind. I am better satisfied with what I already have—your heart!"

"You're the biggest humbug that ever pulled the wool over a man's eyes!"

"But don't you think it nice to have the wool pulled over your eyes?—my way of doing it!"

And she extended her arms with an arch smile—a pantomime of such luscious suggestion as few men could have withstood.

"It's a deuced sight nicer to know you for what you are!"

"You've been happier since you made the discovery; haven't you, dear?"

Who could meet such tactics as these? Silver Riffle Sid cast his mind back over the past twenty-four hours. Happier! He had been literally gnashing his teeth for that period.

He sprang forward and seized her wrists, bringing his face close to hers.

"Now you're hurting me!" she said, gently, before he had time to speak; "but never mind."

"That's the woman of it!" he cried, dropping her wrists at once. You can use your claws on us; but the moment we touch you, we are hurting you!"

"That depends," she replied, still sweetly. "I have found your touch rather agreeable than otherwise, when you went the right way about it. Suppose you put your arm round me now, and try the effect of that."

Sid stared at her, at a loss how to continue his assault.

"You're a cat!" he said, shaking his head. "You're most dangerous when you're doing your prettiest."

"You are determined to quarrel. What is the matter with you?"

"I've found you out."

"You intimated as much before. Can you be a little more explicit? What have you discovered in me that seems to justify your present warlike attitude?"

One thing that Silver Riffle Sid was now finding out, was that this lady had a great deal of self-possession. Under her kittenish softness there was a cool and perfectly-poised will that few men could boast.

"I was here last night."

"Yes; and our parting was a rather odd preparation for our meeting to-night."

"I mean that I returned after leaving you."

"To the garden, here?"

"Yes, to the garden, here."

"Ah! then there may be some apparent grounds for your present frame of mind."

"I should say so—slightly!"

"Apparent. Did you observe that I said apparent?"

"And you might have said *very* apparent."

The lady laughed.

"Now, Sid," she asked in a tone that indicated her confidence that a word would heal the breach between them, "who do you imagine that was?"

"I don't care a curse who it was! I'll bet my life it was one of a host!"

"No, it wasn't."

"It makes no difference to me whether it was or wasn't. One's a plenty."

"Why didn't you shoot him, or me, or both of us? You go armed, don't you?"

"I don't think enough of you for that, my beauty."

For the first time the smile left La Blanchette's face.

"I wonder if that is so!" she said, looking wistfully into the flushed face of the man before her.

That look sent a thrill to Sid's heart. In his anger he had said what might not be easily unsaid. It gave him a more vivid realization of the fact that all along he had looked for a reconciliation.

"An infernal fool!" he repeated again in thought.

Aloud he began to stammer a not very gracious apology:

"You'd provoke a saint to say anything that came handiest—"

"Don't try to smooth it over," she interrupted. "Actions speak louder than words. You did not shoot him, or make any other demonstration, though your present mood shows that you had no suspicion of the truth."

"Look hyer, Blanchette! do you take me for a man who would make a row over a woman, and let it all end in talk? I do go armed, and I know how to talk business when the time comes; but when I put my head in a noose it will be for some woman who hasn't played me for a fool, as ready to serve the other fellow the same trick the minute his back is turned."

"You seem to have held that view of me pretty consistently, from the first, forgetful that there could be no reason for my selecting you from among many others, unless from personal preference," said the woman with a touch of bitterness in her voice.

"It was as your husband that you selected me. But if you think that I would have a blind eye for—"

"Stop! You are about to say what I will not hear from you or any living man!"

Now there was a decided ring in her low, smooth voice; and in the darkness her eyes flashed fire.

Silver Riffle Sid was dumb.

La Blanchette resumed, in her wonted calm tones:—

"The gentleman whom you saw last night, making love to me, as you supposed, was Mr. James Bainbridge, my first support. He called upon me not ten minutes after you went away. I had not seen him for four years. We came out into the garden for the same reason went that I came out here with you—the heat of the house. The scene suggested a passage in the first play that I ever appeared in; and in sport we went through it, too see if both remembered it. You could not have staid long, or you would have been undeceived."

"Blanchette, is this true?" asked Sid, in a wholly different tone from any he had employed as yet.

"Will you come in and be introduced to Mr. Bainbridge? He is to call again to-night, to show me a play that he has been arranging. You can satisfy yourself as to whether there is any likelihood of my favoring him rather than any one of a hundred others."

"Blanchette!"

He reached out and took her hand.

She merely stood quietly and looked up in his face.

"May I do what you suggested a minute ago?"

"What was that?"

"Put my arm about your waist."

"Are you in the habit of asking permission to do such a thing?"

Without further debate, he sat down on the settee and drew her down beside him.

Of their making-up perhaps one word will be sufficient. When they entered the house a few minutes later, there was no trace of tears on La Blanchette's face. If Silver Riffle Sid had been more deeply versed in human nature than he was, he might have found food for thought in this fact. He was satisfied with her clinging caresses, her lingering kisses, and the readiness with which she banished everything disagreeable from their relations, and made love to him in the old way—like a playful puss.

He was introduced to his supposed rival, and outstaid that unsuspecting gentleman.

He had a struggle with his inclination to tell La Blanchette what he had done to injure her prospects, but concluded to keep his own counsel in so delicate a matter, and take steps by himself to retrieve his blunder, merely announcing to her that business would call him from the city for some days.

La Blanchette, with a woman's quick perception, detected the constraint in his manner; and the vagueness with which he answered her questions as to where he was going and why, gave direction to her suspicions.

On the following day he set out for Silver Riffle; but he entered that lively little mining center a very different-looking individual from the dandy who bluffed Colonel Wallingford.

How he appeared, and the reason for the change, will be disclosed in due course, as also the particulars of his very warm reception.

Meanwhile, in consultation with his lawyer, Colonel Wallingford said that he would go in person and look into the identity of the new claimant.

But, after a night spent in walking the floor, wringing his hands and wiping the cold perspiration from his brow, he deferred the execution of his mission, letting the days drag one after another, his dread of the ordeal increasing the longer it was put off.

But, on the day following his trying interview with Silver Riffle Sid, he detected a clerk in a delinquency, and in the irritable state of his nerves reprimanded him sharply. An insolent reply was followed by prompt dismissal; and an hour later the discharged functionary stood hat in hand before La Blanchette.

He had used his eyes and ears to some purpose. He had a secret to sell; and La Blanchette had the business tact to always "put her money where it would do the most good."

An hour later a telegraphic dispatch was winging its way to Miss Nora Fitzgerald, Silver Riffle, Cal.; and La Blanchette herself took passage southward on the following morning.

She was pale, but calm to all outward appearance. Her wonderful self-possession was never more finely displayed. Her "pile" was at stake; yet she "faced the music" as steadily as an old gambler.

At last Gower roused Colonel Wallingford to the necessity for immediate action, and he set out—like a criminal on his way to the gallows!

With his going the scene of our drama is transferred to Silver Riffle.

CHAPTER IV.

PANCAKE PETE.

To one who had read of the boasted climate of California until he has come to believe it a paradise of perennial delights, the fiery heat of the mining districts in midsummer is anything but an agreeable surprise.

And dust? Whew! The whole earth seems to have been encased in an impalpable powder. Ordinary dust will stop on the outside of the skin; but the luckless wight who has ridden half a day in a cloud of California dust feels as if it had penetrated to the very marrow of his bones.

Not far from noon, on a day when the thermometer ranged at a hundred and ten "in a cool place," and not a breath of air stirring, Silver Riffle Sid rode into the camp from which he had derived his "handle."

Man and beast were so covered from head to heel with red dust, that the appearance of either under ordinary circumstances could not be even so much as guessed at.

The latter was a Spanish mule of altogether unusual size, yet whose length and litheness of limb seemed more than counterbalanced by her want of spirit; for, with her head drooping, her long ears flapping limp on either side, and her eyes half closed, she crept along as if she might drop asleep at any step.

But Jem—which was "short" for Jemima—was, like many of her sex, a delusion and a snare. One rallying cry from her master, and, with her ears laid close down along her neck, her eyes sparkling wickedly, her pendulous nether lip drawn up tense, she was ready to run the legs off of anything shod with iron, or know the reason why.

Not less deceptive in appearance was Silver Riffle Sid, whom, however, we will not designate in keeping with the character he had assumed, as Pancake Pete.

His dress consisted in a rusty old red flannel shirt, breeches the original color of which could not be surmised, and stogie boots as rough and hard as if made of rawhide. His hat was a now-almost shapeless piece of felt, which hung down

over his ears and the back of his head, while in front the part which had almost lost its character as a brim was folded back until it rested flat upon the crown.

But more—his hair was a frizzly, frowsy mop that one would have thought had not made the acquaintance of a comb since '49; while an equally unkempt beard, foul besides with tobacco-juice, completely hid the lower part of his face.

His first care was the grooming of his mule, which he attended to himself. He then resorted to the bar, walking with an awkward, slouching gait.

"I say, landlord!" he cried, looking down at his person with a chuckle, "do you 'low, now, to hev enough water runnin' in this dry season to pan out a critter o' my color an' previous condition, an' see ef thar's ary notion o' the r'ale Simon-pure human underneath all this hyar surface dirt?"

"Waal, I reckon, stranger," was the reply of Jerry Judkins, proprietor of the "Inter-ocean House."

"You're my man, then! You moughtn't have a John, now, what kin jest snatch this hyar ole shirt o' mine bald-headed while yer humble sarvant's takin' a snooze, preparatory, so to speak, fur to openin' the ball this evenin'?"

Having put this question with an intonation which indicated that he thought that this might be taxing the hospitality of the house unreasonably, the speaker thrust his head forward with a sidewise twist, elevating his brows and letting his mouth drop open, and so waited the dubious answer.

But the landlord assured him:

"You jest bet we have, boss, an' don't you furgit it!"

"Whoop! the country's safe yit!" shouted Pete, leaping into the air and striking his heels together with a sharp crack.

"Ye see, pard," he went on, as if so unusual a demand needed explanation, "this hyar ole raglan hain't seen nary taste o' aqua puribus sence—sence—waal, sence so long that I disremember; an' I 'lowed as thar was sich a thing as havin' too much of a good thing—even the s'ile of ole Silver Riffle. Haw! haw! haw! haw! But, say!"

And he spun round on one heel, taking in the whole circle of bar-room bummers in a sweeping glance.

Their usual force was just now increased by miners who really did pretend to work when there was water to be had for their sluice-boxes; and they were a thirsty-looking set, in all truth.

"Seems to me I see a lot o' long toms a-layin' high an' dry around hyar, a-warpin' an' a-crackin' in the sun! Step up, brothers! Hyar's a crick what don't run dry in the worst o' times, thank the Lord!"

The smiling alacrity with which they accepted his hospitality need not be described.

"I'll swar!" he cried, beaming upon them benignly, "this hyar's warmin' to the cockles of a man's heart! Put it down deep, boys, whar it'll do the most good."

And when they had complied, throwing their heads back and tossing the liquor down their throats as if it was destined for no goal short of their boots, he bowed himself out of the room, slapping his thigh with his hat, with the assurance:

"I'll see ye later!—I will, s'elp me! Haw! haw! haw!"

He took a bucket of water to his room, and after he had thrown his shirt out to the Chinaman, began his ablutions, with a care not to disarrange his hair and beard that would have been a surprise to the bummers who were assuring one another that he was one of the old sort, and privately resolving to a man that they would not fail to be on hand that night.

Indeed, when he made his appearance, the crowd of thirsty mortals that awaited him looked as if, while he slept, each and every one of them had been out through the camp to drum up recruits among the hosts of the dead-broke.

His going to his room for a nap was merely a ruse. He was lying in cover till dark.

When the time he had chosen for action was arrived, he first went out the back way to avoid observation, and stationed his mule, saddled and bridled, at a little distance behind the hotel. She was not hitched. She stood with hanging head, as if asleep.

He then returned to the hotel, entering the bar-room as if from the sleeping-apartments.

Among the new-comers was one red-eyed and bulbous-nosed old fellow, whose eager expectancy found tongue in every part of his body. His sycophantish grin, the soft rubbing of his hands together, the involuntary smacking of his tremulous lips—were all pathetic appeals for the poison his very soul craved.

Pancake Pete's eye marked him at once.

"You shall have it, my boy," he said to himself—"and something else along with it!"

But he looked around upon the waiting faces with a grin of amusement; and taking off his hat and bowing repeatedly, as if their gathering were an ovation to him, he cried:

"Waal, blow me ef this hyar don't look as if

the whole home-guard had turned out! But I'm glad to see ye, gents, every last one o' ye. I reckon, now, ye're all ready fur to take in a horn that'll knock the socks off'n ole Gabr'el's tooter; so step up into line, an' let's see whose paunch reaches furthest under the aidge o' the bar."

"Hooray fur the gov'nor!" shouted one of the bummers, swinging his hat wildly above his head.

A perfect howl of delight was the response.

"I say, pard!" cried another, grasping Sid by the hand, "who in thunder be you, anyway? Hold on, boys!—we oughtn't to put this hyar down without givin' the gent's good-luck the benefit of it."

"That's so! Give the boss a hummer, an' then nail it!"

"I'll leave it to you, gents," said Pete, "to say who I am. Don't nobody drop to me?"

"Nary drop!"

"Have you bloomed in this hyar camp before?"

"Bloomed! Waal, now ye're shoutin'! But ain't thar nary old rooster hangin' around hyar yit—none o' the old gang?"

"What time was it when you flourished, pard?"

"Way back."

"I've hung out hyar nigh on to five year; an' blow me ef I don't disremember ye, ef I ever see ye—meanin' no disrespect to you, pard."

"Five year! Waal, you're a young 'un, you be! Why, bless yer sweet soul! it war before you war born, I reckon, that ole Pancake Pete—that's me—swung this hyar camp."

"What're 'givin' us, boss?" demanded the person who resented being thus summarily set down for a youngster.

"You must be a 'Forty-niner," observed another, with a look of respect.

"'Forty-niner nothin'!" was Pete's contemptuous repudiation. "I'm a 'Fifty-oner, I am, b'gee! August twenty-seven, eighteen hundred and fifty-one! Hey, ole man?"

And with the stroke of a playful grizzly, he clapped Old Flip on the shoulder, and thrusting his face close to that of the bummer, stared into his eyes.

There was a crash of shivering glass. Old Flip's whisky had fallen from his hand to the floor.

He turned ghastly pale, except that the end of his lumpy nose changed from purple to blue; and with eyes round and mouth agape, he stared, cringing and quaking, at the man who had pronounced that ominous date.

CHAPTER V.

QUICK WORK.

"WHAT'S the matter with the old man?"

"Got 'em ag'in!"

"Snakes!"

"Knock 'em off, Flippy, old boy!"

"Devils an' tarantlers! Thar's one on the end of his nose!"

"Oh, you be blowed!" interposed one who thought that the old bummer was not getting fair play, with so many at him. "Thar ain't nothin' the matter with the ole man. The gent knocked his glass out of his hand."

"Right you air, pard," corroborated Pete. "The ole man an' me's all right. I 'low, now, he's the only old side pard I kin find in the house."

"Set 'em up ag'in, barkeeper. My money pays fur the pieces."

"Ain't that so, you old snoozer? You orter remember somethin' about the old 'fifty-one days."

Old Flip tried to speak; but it was as if his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He could only shake his head dumbly, as he shrunk from the hand that was again laid upon his shoulder.

"You're out, boss," said one of the miners, speaking for him. "Old Flip is one o' the stand-bys; but this hyar camp never see his beautiful mug till four year ago. I remember the time well when he rolled in, blind drunk an' jest weepin' fur blood. He's been drunk the heft o' the time sence."

"Is that so!" cried Pancake Pete, with a look of exaggerated regret. "Ain't thar no sweet soul what's likin' to know me in this hyar burgh, an' what I kin get drunk with over them ole times o' 'fifty-one?"

"Why, gents, them was times as it makes a man's heart ache to look back to! In them ole times the pay-dirt was cryin' fur to have somebody come an' scoop it in, an' the nuggets would whistle to ye from the hillside as ye went by—fact!—I'm a liar clean down to the ground ef it ain't so! An' whisky!—whisky? Maybe you won't b'lieve me; but we uster run our cradles with it in the dry season! But, gents,—oh, listen to me, gents!—the beauty o' them ole times—the beauty!—war the stiff!"

"After one sweet row, I took it into my head to weigh one o' em. Thar wa'n't nothin' in camp in the weighin' line that 'ud touch one side of his great toe; so we had to git a gang o' fellers to heft on him, an' estimate it. We 'lowed he weighed about a ton."

"Oh, that ain't no stretcher! We let the

buryin' of 'em out by contract. Thar was a reg'lar company formed; imported Chinamen to do the trenchin', an' all that sort o' thing. An' that thar company useter plant 'em fur the old lead they could pick out o' their carcasses!"

"Maybe I hear somebody callin' me a liar! Ef you wa'n't thar, what in Cain do you know about it?"

To enforce this challenge the speaker planted his fists on his hips and thrust forward his chin till his beard stood out horizontally, while he glared about for takers.

One spoke the sentiment of the crowd.

"Boss, that thar's a stiff story; but I reckon it'll go down with three fingers o' Jerry Judkins's best back of it."

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared Pete, seizing the hand of the joker, and shaking it as if he would not rest content short of a dislocation at the shoulder. "It does taste a leetle pethy an' no mistake."

"Barkeeper, sling us somethin' that'll cut a new groove down the red lane!"

"Ef this hyar don't s'arch out the cold spots in yer in'ards," said Jerry, as he poured the fluid lightning round, "you must be copper-lined and riveted on the inside."

"Take it standin', gents!" shouted Pete, "an' don't let none of it stop short o' the cellar!"

"May it be a long time before any of us is buried as deep!"

"Hyar goes, down the main shaft!"

"I'm pourin' mine down the Devil's Stir-about!"

"What's that consarnin' the Devil's Stir-about?" cried Pete. "That thar reminds me o' what I sot out to tell ye about them good ole times. Is thar ary galoot in this hyar camp what's heard about ole Whisky Skin, as put his bones to soak down thar?"

"Waal, I reckon, boss!"

"Give us the straight of it, ef you was on the ground."

"I wa'n't nowhar else. But whar's my Christian friend with the lighthouse nose, warnin' wary mariners off the rocks of intemperance?"

"That's so. Whar's Old Flip?"

"Blowed ef he ain't cut the ranch."

"What! the ole man run away from his liquor?"

"He's gone, sure."

"Waal, that knocks me!"

But it was true. While Pancake Pete was entertaining the crowd with his exaggerated account of the good old times of 'Fifty-one, the bummer had stolen out of the room.

He heard Pete ask after him, just as he slipped through the door; but instead of responding to his name, he fled away in the darkness, peering over his shoulder, and muttering disjointedly to himself:

"'Fifty-one! August twenty-seventh! It has come at last! This hyar's the annivarsary! I knowed it would; I've felt it in my bones! Good Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

But if he feared pursuit from the saloon which he had just left, it would seem that his apprehensions were ill-founded; for Pancake Pete manifested nothing more than an amused curiosity about him.

"Who in Cain is that old bloke, anyway?" he asked, grinning at the crowd.

"Why, that's Ole Flip—the raal original Ole Flip. He's the reg'lar ole stan'-by in this hyar burgh, as pans out all the tailin's o' whisky."

"That ain't sich a bad handle, ef that thar's his best holt. But has he got sich a notion fur tailin's that he runs away from three fingers straight?"

"Waal, pard," said a would-be explainer of this unheard-of proceeding, "I allow as Jerry Judkins's best is so blamed poor that it turns his stummick!"

All joined in the laugh at the expense of the proprietor of the Inter-ocean, who, however, seemed to think the excellence of his liquor too well established to need vindication.

"Waal, I reckon I'll hev to see more of this galoot as runs away from this hyar," said Pancake Pete. "Whar does he hang out?"

Several volunteered enlightenment on this head.

"But, boss," interposed one, "ef you drop in on the ole man to home, don't you go skylarkin' around his darter."

"He's got a darter, then, has he?"

"An' don't you furgit it! The likeliest gal in these hyar parts. The Riffle piles its chips on the Mountain Rose every time!"

A vociferous assent to this on all sides showed that Old Flip's girl was universally popular.

However, Pancake Pete did not pursue that phase of the subject, but wen on with his account of the tragedy at the Little Cassie Mine.

He had just concluded, when a man who had entered the room during the recital, and had kept his eyes fixed steadily on the speaker, and listened to every word with a doubtful expression on his countenance, stepped up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I think I've seen you before, sir," he said, in a short, peremptory tone.

Pete turned with a smile of eager expectancy.

"What? No!" he cried, extending his hand. "Is thar a galoot what knows ole Pancake Pete in this hyar burg? Put 'er thar, boss, fur ninety

day! I'd orter remember ye—I swear I ought; but you've got the lead o' me, an' that's a fact."

There was about this claimant of his acquaintance an air which bespoke a leader of men. He had a commanding figure, an erect carriage of the head, a prominent nose and clear, dark eyes.

He was known as Cap Ledyard; and he "ran" the camp.

He did not heed the proffered hand, but said, coldly:

"If you'll step outside, I'll make you acquainted with some friends of mine."

"Waal, boss, you do me proud!" said Pete, betraying no apprehension, if he felt any. "I take it, by your style, that you're a chief. I'm an old rooster on this hyar stampin'-ground myself; an' I don't mind gittin' the run of the new deal."

He yielded himself to the guidance of the captain with only a look of curiosity.

At the door Cap Ledyard stepped before him to lift the latch.

Then a startling incident occurred.

With the quickness of lightning the self-styled Pancake Pete caught him by the coat-collar and the side of his neck, tripped up his heels, and sent him crashing to the floor, head-downward!

"Whoop!" he yelled, swinging around. "Cl'ar the track! I'm sure death on a blind mule!"

And whipping out a brace of revolvers, self-cockers both, as every eye was quick to see, he charged through the crowd like a whirlwind.

There was a back door, flanked by a window. Straight for this latter, Pete made his way. As he reached it he leaped into the air, at the same time whirling around, and gathering himself into a ball, by drawing up his knees and ducking his head.

In this way he went backward through the window with a crash, and disappeared from sight, leaving the spectators of the lightning-like maneuver staring open-mouthed with astonishment through the black and jagged opening.

"After him! after him!" shouted Cap Ledyard, scrambling to his feet in a rage, and in his turn rushing toward the window.

"Who is it?" asked some one.

"Who is it Tophet!" roared the captain. "I'll tell you when I've got a rope around his neck!"

And he cleared the window at a bound, and was in turn lost to their sight.

Outside they heard him calling to his men, and the rush of many feet in response.

Pell-mell one and all rushed from the saloon, to be on hand at the "fun."

They were in time to hear the clatter of flying hoofs rapidly receding in the distance.

"Who is it? What is it all about?" was the demand.

But there was no one to give answer. The stranger had drawn Cap Ledyard and his crowd after him in a life and death race; and the uninitiated were left to their speculations.

CHAPTER VI.

A COMPROMISE.

WHEN Pancake Pete placed his mule in readiness for instant use, he did it with a very clear perception of the chances in the game he was playing.

He knew that he would have to run the gantlet of sharp eyes and equally sharp ears, after making himself a conspicuous mark for observation.

It would not do, then, to trust wholly to his disguise and his power of changing his voice.

He had thrown out the bait of a treat on his arrival, to draw Old Flip into his net, he had remained in seclusion all the afternoon on the pretext of having his shirt washed, but really to have the advantage of darkness when he underwent the ordeal of meeting the man he had good reason to fear; and now the event had proved the wisdom of his caution.

On clearing the window of the Inter-ocean, he had leaped out into a night of flaring lightning, roaring thunder, buffeting wind, and pelting rain.

Before a shot had been fired after him, he was in the saddle and away; but Cap Ledyard and his men were almost at his heels, and from time to time the gleaming lightning showed them their prey.

At the outset they had vented their rage in hoarse cries and maledictions and a rattling volley of pistol-shots; but realizing the futility of all three, they, when they got fairly down to the chase, rode in grim silence.

Were they gaining upon him; or was his trusty Jem serving his master well in this crisis?

He did not glance over his shoulder, but, giving his whole attention to getting the most out of the animal, let his ears tell of success or failure.

Until he heard a pistol-shot, he believed that he was at least holding his own.

For the first five miles there was no diminution in the sounds of pursuit; but after that he knew that some were falling behind.

Still there were clattering hoofs that sounded as near as at the outset; and this did not change when all had died out in the distance save the regular click-a-click of one dogged "stayer."

Mile after mile now passed in an iron strug-

gle of endurance. Well did Pancake Pete know who it was that would not yield until his horse sunk under him.

Then the fugitive saw signs of labor in the movements of the beast to whose fleet heels he had intrusted his life.

"It's all up!" he muttered, between his set teeth. "Well, I have the best chance I could ask for. It's man to man!"

Still he kept on without looking back, though the rhythmic thud of those pursuing heels were drawing steadily nearer.

At last there came a hoarse challenge.

"Pull up thar, you snoozer! I've got you, sure!"

"Hang on to me, then!" retorted Pete.

He flung this banter over his shoulder, for the first time measuring with his eye the distance between him and his implacable foe.

"You bet yer sweet I fe!" was the response.

Still Pete did not comply.

"Blast yer eye! do you think I'm goin' to sp'ile a neat job fur the rope by pluggin' yer ugly carcass? You're mightily mistook!"

"Don't stop on my account."

"I'd drop ye, ef I wasn't afraid o' breakin' yer neck by the fall."

"You're too tenderhearted!"

"Will you knock under?"

"You bet!"

Pancake Pete spoke in an interval of momentary darkness, and at the same instant he pulled up his panting mule and dropped from her back.

The next flash of lightning showed him barricaded behind her body, with a revolver trained across her back and his hat held over the cock to protect it from the rain.

It wouldn't do to take any chances of its missing fire in such a situation as this!

But Cap Ledyard had been as smart as he. His quick ear had detected the abrupt stopping of the mule; and his experience in the pistol warfare of the border told him what to expect.

He too had pulled up his horse and leaped off on the other side; so that the lightning discovered both men in the same position.

"You're a mighty sharp leetle man!" was Cap Ledyard's approval of the maneuver which had put them on a fairly equal footing.

He did not grudge his antagonist anything he could gain by the exercise of his wits. On the contrary, it added zest to the game to play against one who proved worthy of his best efforts.

"You play to me very neatly," replied Pete.

"Lead off ag'in, pard," said Cap.

"I allow it's your lead, boss. I've turned the trump. What do you do?"

"Nary beg, ef that's what yer after. I stand my hand."

"Play away, then."

"Don't be impatient. I'll lead you a screamer in a minute."

"I say, boss!" called Pete.

"Spit 'er out!" came the response.

"Would you jest as lieve tell me who in Cain you air after, bein' as I allow never to have seen you before in my life?"

"No go, pard!"

"It's your say-so; though it would be some consolation to know the why of the thing before I snuff you out."

"Is that what you're waitin' fur?"

"You bet!"

"Look a-hyar, Sid! you know that I told ye ef I ever ketched ye at the Riffle ag'in, I'd cook your goose fur ye; an' I'm bound to do it."

"I cave on the identity question," said Pete, with a change of voice which showed that it had thus far been disguised.

"It don't make a dog-gone mite o' difference to me whether ye do or don't."

"But, Cap."

"Waal?"

"Did any o' the boys drop to me; or did you give me away?"

"What would I do that fur? I've got my gang better trained than that. When I toss 'em a bit o' meat, they snap at it, without no questions."

"Then, they don't know?"

"I reckon not. You're mighty well got up. But no man kin shake me ef he opens his mouth."

"It was my voice, then?"

"It wa'n't nothin' else. But what's all this chinnin' fur? Do you allow to be able to walk over me back into camp? I won't shoot at your cheek, pard!"

"That ain't my game."

"What is it, then?"

"Cap, you haven't anything against me personally."

"I'm the head chief o' Silver Riffle; an' it's my duty to thin out you snide gents with wax on yer fingernails an' a too dog-gone hefty slight at dealin' from the top, bottom, or middle—or from yer sleeve now an' ag'in. I give you one chance, an'—"

"Suppose you save the rest of that for another time? I ain't waiting hyer for your gang to come up and run over me like cattle."

"You're an impatient mortal, seems to me. But light out when you git tired o' stoppin'."

"I mean that I propose to use the time to talk business."

"All right. Give us that then. Suit yer-self."

"Cap, would you throw off on this hyer for a good thing?"

"Ho! ho! you're beginnin' to cry small."

"I ain't no hog. I know that all you've got to do is to wait for your crowd, and bag me, body and breeches."

"You bet!"

"But I know, too, that you run your office on business principles, and not on sentiment."

"Fur what thar is in it, eh?"

"Yes."

"An' you know how it is yerself."

"I allow we're all looking out for the mighty dollar, one way or another. That's what I came to the Riffle for. Do you fancy it was for a trifle?"

"Waal, that depends on your idee o' my hand."

"Haven't I had a chance to judge something about that?"

Cap Ledyard chuckled softly over this implied compliment to his prowess.

"Well," pursued Pete, "what can you make out of my carcass? Nothing."

"It's my word, Sid. I never go back on that. You know that it takes a tight rein to curb my animiles. When they see me begin to weaken, up she goes!"

"But they will never know. You haven't told them, and I'm not likely to give it away. Say that you've made a mistake in your man, and we'll ride back to camp side by side."

"What did you come hyar for, anyhow?" asked Cap.

He did not care to ask Pete directly what there was in it, if he fell in with his proposition.

But Pete saw that the matter was now virtually settled, if only he reached Cap's price.

"It's a thousand dollars apiece, sure; and if the thing is worked right there may be more got out of it," he said, as a "feeler."

"A thousand dollars!" repeated Cap, and added, with a peculiar significance in his voice, "on credit!"

"Did you ever know me to talk for the sake of the chin-music?" demanded Pete, with a touch of indignation.

"But thar's a kind o' profuseness about you jest at the present time—"

"If five hundred down will convince you that I am talking business, I'll advance that out of my own pocket."

"It's money as talks, an' that's a fact."

"Consider that settled, then. Is it a go?"

"Blood?"

"Well, that's as you manage it."

"What's the racket? Give it to us right off the reel."

"If I let you into the thing, and you see your way to a thousand—remember I don't promise more—we'll strike hands on it?"

"What do you take me fur? If you give me the tip an' I take it, do I throw off on ye then? I'm a white man, I want ye to understand!"

"That's all right. Well, hyer's my side of the bargain: Pancake Pete has the free run of the Riffle so long as he carries himself straight. If you catch Sid Sloper in the camp limits, introduce him to the judge, as you passed your word."

"Done! Now then, what's the go?"

"Old Flip's daughter is worth two thousand to Colonel Wallingford."

"What! Sarry Ann?"

"Yes, Sarry Ann."

"But what does his nibs want o' her? But then, she's a likely enough girl, fur the matter o' that."

"Make no mistake! He ain't struck after her that way, ye understand. It's business from the ground up."

"What business?"

"I'll never tell you, for the reason that I don't know. All I know is from a pard o' mine in Frisco. He says to me—'Wallingford wants her bad! You get her whar you can hold her on call, and make the best terms you can with him. But—lose the old man!'"

"Lose the old man!" repeated Cap Ledyard.

"Oho!"

"I give it to you as I got it," pursued Pete.

"And I'll take the work off yer hands, my boy!" said Cap, with decision.

He compressed his lips and closed one eye, wagging his head forward and back, as if it moved on a pivot, in a very pronounced manner.

He was thinking to himself:

"And I'll do the negotiatin', ef it please the court! Two thousand! Ef he wants the gal, an' don't want the ole man—a feller as is 'way up in G, like him!—it's worth more'n two thousand to him, an' don't ye furgit it!"

Without more ado, he put up his revolver and swung himself into the saddle.

Silver Riffle Sid followed suit.

He too had his secret thoughts.

"So, you bloke! You'd bolt a buffalo, horns first, you would! You think you've got the bulge on me, don't ye? Instead of that, I've put a ring in your nose, as you'll find out one o' these fine mornings, when Silver Riffle Sid if 'far, far away!'"

And he laughed in his sleeve.

"I'll trouble you fur that thar five hundred," was the gentle hint that broke in on his contented musings.

"Will you wait until we git to a light, to see to count it?"

"H'm! on second thought, I reckon I will."

So side by side they rode back.

"Boys," said Cap Ledyard, when they met his lagging gang, who looked not a little surprised at the amicable relations of two who had set out so hotly, "I was a leetle off my base. This hyar ain't the gent I took him fur."

The same off-hand explanation had to satisfy those who had been left waiting at the camp.

As Sid enabled them to wash it down at his expense, it stuck in no one's throat.

Silver Rifle Sid invited Cap to a friendly game, and under cover of the play passed him the five hundred dollars promised.

But, meanwhile he had plied him with liquor; and when he proposed that they continue, now in earnest, Cap assented.

In an hour Sid had won his money back, wished Cap better luck next time, got tucked snugly in bed, and was dreaming sweetly with a serene smile on his handsome face!

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

THE canyon was filled with the liquid music of rushing water. That was the one spot where the cheek was fanned by a breath of air cooled and set in motion by the current.

Midway between the river-bed and the brow of the cliff, on the southern, and therefore shady side, stood a young girl, on a ledge so narrow as to be scarcely more than a perch.

A less steady brain might have been made to swim by a glance into the gulf that yawned at her feet; but she seemed quite heedless of danger.

In one hand she held three or four wild flowers, and her eyes were fixed covetously on another blossom that sprung from a crevice in the rock beyond her reach.

"Don't risk it!" called a voice over her head.

She looked up, with a smile and a faint brightening of color.

Over the verge of the cliff she saw a cheery face, framed in a mass of disordered "strawberry blonde" hair, and mounted on a pair of broad shoulders.

The blue-gray eyes that laughed banteringly down at her had a clear, honest expression, in keeping with the tone of easy good fellowship in which the hail had been sent.

"I can get it easy enough, if I choose!" she retorted, with a piqued toss of her head.

"You're more like to break your pretty neck?"

"It won't cost you anything, if I do."

"Oh, yes it will—a ducking, maybe, fishing you out of the drink."

"You needn't trouble yourself."

"Nan!"

The cry was short and sharp—a cry of exhortation.

The next instant came the rattle of falling gravel down the face of the cliff.

"Don't chance it, Nan!" urged the anxious voice again. "Wait a minute, and I'll get you all you're wanting o' them."

"Thank you. I can get what I want myself."

And heedless of the warning, the girl slid her foot along the narrowing ledge, and hugging her body close to the rock, crept inch by inch along the face of the cliff.

"Stop! stop!" called the young fellow, who was making his way down to her as fast as the difficulties of the descent would permit. "You don't know the danger! If you fall, you will go into the Stirabout, sure!"

She turned her head, to look into his anxious face with a defiant laugh.

"You'll give me a dare again, will—"

But the sentence ended in a low cry of alarm. That momentary diversion of her attention precipitated the danger which might otherwise have been overpassed.

Her foothold gave way; she felt herself falling; and now heedless of her flowers, she grasped something—she knew not what—with her free hand; and her descent was arrested.

How she clung to the face of the rock, mute, breathless, as pale as marble. Her lips were compressed, her nostrils dilated, her eyes wide and round, her brows knit.

She stared straight down at the rushing water. Was she so near to death as that? She had never thought of it before, as pertaining to herself.

"Hang on!—for God's sake, hang on!" cried the youth who was hurrying to her rescue. "I shall be where I can help ye in a minute. Don't struggle; it will only make matters worse."

In his haste, he slipped, and came within an ace of going to the bottom. But his quickness and his strong grip saved him.

He could not follow the path along which she had gone, and render her any assistance. He went further down.

There, immediately below her, he braced himself as firmly as possible, grasped with one hand a sprout that grew in a crevice, and said:

"Now, come! If one goes, we'll go together!"

The girl replied in a voice that thrilled him strangely. It was deeper-toned than usual, and quiet, as if the imminence of death had calmed her.

"Go away, Mr. Gerald," she said. "You can't help me, and will only destroy yourself."

"What do you take me for?" cried honest Gerald Fitzgerald, with a burst of indignation.

"Will you do as I say? The longer you keep me waiting, the less strength I shall have to meet the shock. Come, Nannie! Now I'm ready."

What was there new in his voice as he pronounced the diminutive form of her name? It made her catch her breath. A sudden warm glow swept over the chill of the fear of death that was upon her.

She clung to her hold yet a little longer, as if to fix within her memory that last moment of life, so as to carry it with her through the Valley of the Shadow; and then, closing her eyes, let go.

There was a breathless rush, a shock, and then:

"Oh, Nan, my girl!"

His arms were about her. Her head rested against his breast so that she could hear the loud beating of his heart.

With a swooning, dreamy feeling she opened her eyes slowly, and saw his white face bent over hers, and his eyes gazing at her as they had never done before.

As if magnetized by that, her eyes were closing again, when his face bent closer, and she felt his warm breath on her cheek.

Then with a quick sigh she started into full consciousness, and struggled to free herself from his embrace.

She said nothing. She could not speak—not just yet.

But Gerald's tongue was loose enough. Now that the peril was over, he made light of it. He joked her on her mountaineering.

But there was a cadence of tremulous pathos in his voice for all that, and he clung to her with both hands where one would have done as well, while he assisted her to a place of security.

Then, too, he was inconsistent; for as his tongue ran on, before he knew it he was telling her how she had frightened him, and how glad he was to have her safe once more, and praising her pluck.

Still she could not speak; the strain on her nerves had been too great to be soon overcome.

So he got her up the face of the cliff, and set her down where she could have the sense of security of seeing only the flat surface of the earth about her.

"But you shall have that flower, if it costs a leg!" he cried. "Wait one minute."

Then she found voice to protest.

"Don't!" she pleaded, reaching out to seize his hand and looking into his face as she had never done before.

But he broke away, laughing.

"I'd like to see the place on these rocks I can't climb!" he said.

And while she pronounced his name faintly, he disappeared over the brink.

Presently he came back with the blossom in triumph, and put it into her hand.

"You ought not to have exposed yourself again," she said. "It was foolish of me."

By this time she was herself again, almost—only a little paler and tremulous.

But as she regained her self-possession, a change stole over Gerald. He seemed to hover about her with a feverish restlessness. He laughed easily and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, as if ill at ease.

The girl turned away, and he walked by her side until, at a little distance back from the river course, they came to a rude hut.

What was noticeable about it was that while it was a tumble-down structure of the most disreputable sort—a perfect tatterdemalion of a shanty, even in that country of shabby architecture—yet the door-stone was clean swept, and there was a spotless white curtain at its one window. But, most unusual of all, a vine had been made to grow over the low door.

Here the girl stopped, and with her eyes on the flower which she held, said:

"I haven't thanked you yet. I don't think I know how to do it, as it ought to be—"

"Suppose we don't say anything more about that?" suggested Gerald, with an uneasy laugh. "I reckon I did about as much to get you into the scrape as out of it."

He was looking down at her fair face and the smooth black hair that was such a contrast to his tumbled mop of blonde hair. Then, was anything ever so graceful as her slender figure?

But in the midst of his speculations, she suddenly lifted her eyes to his face.

They were great, dark, expressive eyes. It had often occurred to him that he could not look into them and tell a lie to save his life.

Just now their effect on him was very marked. He flushed like a detected culprit, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, took off his hat,

—not to bow, but to whip his thigh with it, while he plunged headlong into speech.

"Oh, by-the-by! I came near forgetting. Sis says that you're to come over the first thing in the morning—without fail! The old gentleman has got it *bad* again. He has found a new genus, or species, or something or other; and the lot of you are to rummage the whole country for specimens. You'll come, of course? Can't do without you, anyway."

Then, as if in a great hurry, he bade her good-by, and strode off.

She entered the shanty, and there, safe behind the curtain, peered out and followed him with a new light in her eyes until he was out of sight.

Then she turned with a sigh to the flower he had risked life and limb to get for her, and touched it tenderly with her lips, and hid it in her bosom, and then flung herself down on a stool, and with her face buried in her arms on the table, burst into tears.

Out in the mountain solitude, he stood and slapped his thigh vigorously with his hat, and muttered with a strange delight:

"Well! well!"

And turn whichever way he might, he could see her eyes as she had lifted them suddenly to his face; and he had but to close his own eyes to feel her in his arms again, with her head on his breast.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE FLARE OF THE LIGHTNING.

THAT night supper waited for Old Flip; and "his girl, Sarry Ann," with that filial devotion which makes it a point of loyalty to share to the full the wretchedness of its object, left her own food untasted, while she watched with growing uneasiness for his coming.

To reach home from the camp, he had to cross the Rifle at a point where its narrowed canyon was spanned by a tree trunk.

Ever since they had lived there, Sarry Ann had been haunted by the dread that he would some time fall from this bridge and be sucked into the Devil's Stirabout.

Night after night, when she had reason to suppose that he was in a worse state of intoxication than usual, she had waited at this point to see him safely across.

It often taxed all her powers of persuasion to induce him to creep over when he insisted that he could "walk a chalk line with the best of 'em."

When she could stand the suspense no longer she threw a shawl over her head, and went out into the buffeting wind and rain.

As she neared the bridge, a lull in the wind enabled her to hear some one approaching it on the other side, at a run.

She cried out:

"Father, is that you?"

But the wind swept a fold of her shawl across her face, so that her words were smothered, and only the sound of her voice went out into the night like a cry of alarm.

Old Flip heard it; and it sent a thrill of terror to his heart.

He stopped short, and listened with bated breath.

Then the black heavens were cleft asunder as with a sword of flame, to be accompanied by an instantaneous crash as if the firmament were falling about his ears.

Blinded, terrified more than ever, he rushed on again.

Meanwhile Sarry Ann had struggled out of the enveloping folds of her shawl; but in the interval a new thought had flashed through her mind.

The tread of the runner was too regular for that of a drunken man. Suppose it was not Old Flip?

Though she lived in a spot as secluded as it was wild, and though the men of that region were "as bad as they make 'em," yet ordinarily she was not afraid. She knew them all and was used to them, and none had ever shown her anything but respect.

But why should any one be running in such a night along a path that was hazardous in daylight?

That made her timid; and while she hesitated the man reached the bridge.

A distant flash of lightning illuminated the scene just enough so that she could discern his figure dimly; but a dash of rain in her face nearly blinded her for the moment, so that she failed to identify it.

He took advantage of the light to fairly run across the tree trunk. She saw him balance by twisting his body and swinging his arms on either side.

The movements seemed too active for Old Flip; and with sudden misgiving the girl shrunk behind a bush.

But just as he neared the spot where she was concealed, another flash, prolonged and quivering, revealed him to her with unmistakable distinctness.

But what was the matter? His face was ghastly pale, his eyes wild, and his mouth wide with the pant, not so much of an exhausted man, as of one stricken with terror.

In that disordered country almost any horror might be anticipated. Her first thought was that he had slain some one.

Instantly followed a daughter's instinct. Whatever he had done, he was her father; and she was ready to take her stand at his side, against the world.

As a spark ignites powder, so was his excitement transmitted to her. Her face reflected the wild look on his.

With a great cry of mingled fear and defiance she sprang forward; and, forgetful of self, her grasp relaxed, so that the wind tore one side of the shawl away, and swept the whole from her head and shoulders.

"Father! father! what is the matter?"

But the bellowing thunder drowned her voice, so that, as before, only an inarticulate cry was borne to his ear.

He saw her white face, her wild eyes, and her garments fluttering in the wind, as she ran toward him; and with a shriek of horror tore past her, plunging headlong into the darkness that succeeded the blinding flash, down the pathway to their hut.

In amazement at the thought that the sight of her had added to his fear, she followed as fast as she could.

She heard him burst through the shanty door and bang it after him; and when she reached it and sought to enter she found that she was barred out.

"Father! father! it is only me!" she cried, wondering more and more at his strange in-fatuation.

No sound from within responded to her call.

Had he fallen in a swoon? Was he dead?

She put her ear to a crevice in the door. A momentary change in the direction of the wind enabled her to hear a hoarse, rasping wheeze.

It was the forced breathing of a man mad with terror—a man driven to bay.

"Father! let me in. It is me, Sarry Ann," she called again, beating on the door.

Then within the hut went up a cry that made the girl, crouching without on the door-stone, at the mercy of the tempest, shudder with a dread that she had never experienced before.

"Sarry Ann! Sarry Ann!"

It was a wail of such abject fear as a terrified child sometimes sets up. In a man it was awful. She thought that he had gone mad.

Could she go in there and be alone with him, even if he could be induced to let her in?

It was not personal violence that she feared. Indeed she did not think of that. But there was something in the idea of the dethronement of the reason like the disembodiment of the spirit. It was an unreasoning dread like that inspired by the supernatural.

But the daughter's loyalty was invincible. Sane or insane, a criminal—a very murderer, if the worst must come—he was her father still.

"Father! here I am—outside the door. Let me in."

She heard him cross the floor, with the stealthy step of a hunted creature on the alert.

Creeping close up to the door, he listened, without answering her.

"Father, don't you hear me?" she called once more.

"Who's hyar?" he responded, at last, speaking in a loud, aggressive tone, and with his lips so close to her ear that she leaped up, startled as if by an electric shock.

"Me, Sarry Ann," she replied, when, with her hand pressed over her bounding heart, she could find voice.

"Is that you, Sarry Ann?" he demanded, as gruffly as before.

"Yes. Let me in."

"What air ye doin' out thar?"

And now his voice as abruptly became a petulant whine.

"I came out to see you over the bridge. But why don't you lift the bar, and let me in?"

"Did you see anything out yon?"

"No—nothing but you."

"You're sure ye didn't see yer—yer—"

But he broke off abruptly, and sent up a wail of craven misery.

"Oh, Lord! Lord! what's to become o' me?"

"Let me in, father—please do!"

"Oh, be keerful! be keerful, my dear!"

And with shaking hands he lifted the bar, and opened the door just wide enough to permit the thrusting forth of his nose.

Sarry Ann had now made up her mind that the sole cause of this excitement was a touch of the "jim-jams." Her fears gave place to the depression of sadness.

She pushed her way in through the reluctantly-opened door, and leaving the old bumper to close and bar it to his own satisfaction, went and sat down, dropping her head on her arm on the table.

"Sarry Ann, whar air ye?" whined the old man.

"Here," she replied, apathetically.

"Oh, my gal! whar hev ye been?" he asked, creeping up to her, and stroking her arm, as he crouched close to her side.

She did not reply; her heart was too heavy. She did not respond to his touch. There comes a time when tenderness lies dead.

"Cain't we hev a light?" he pleaded. "I'm afraid in the dark!"

She got up and lighted a candle.

The old reprobate clung to her side, fondling

her and seeking to be assured again and again that she had seen nothing unusual without.

When he was made to realize that it was she by whose appearance he had been so startled, he grew somewhat calmer, though he continued to start at every sound, and listen with eyes wide and mouth agape, as if he feared the fall of some dread calamity.

"I thought it was yer mother, my dear!" he whined, scrutinizing her countenance to trace again the resemblance, and satisfy himself that he had really been deceived by it.

But the girl could not endure this. She thought of that mother whom she could not remember, and of whom her father's accounts had been so unsatisfactory, and the vision of what the dead must have suffered overcame her and moved her to tears.

"Let me go! let me go!" she sobbed; and tearing herself away, she ran up a stairway as steep as a ladder, to a triangular compartment under the roof of the shanty, scarcely bigger than a rabbit hutch.

This was her one retreat from the world, not from her misery; for here, on her straw pallet, she had wept many bitter tears.

Far into the night she lay awake, listening to the sounds of restlessness below.

From time to time Old Flip called to her, only to be assured of her vicinity, with the dread of silence and solitude which springs from fear.

When sometimes, in the depths of her despair, she failed to respond, he would whine and mumble to himself, like a peevish child.

Toward morning she sunk into a dream-haunted stupor, the result of utter exhaustion.

The most heartbreaking of her dreams were those in which appeared a face framed in a mass of tumbled hair which in frankness and honesty must be admitted to be red.

But the blue-gray eyes, no longer with their sly twinkle, looked at her contemptuously, and the cheery smile that had greeted her over the verge of the cliff was now jeering.

She woke, sobbing as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER IX.

A MORNING CALL.

ON the following day a very marked reaction of feeling set in with Old Flip.

He astonished Sarry Ann by his unwonted jollity.

"Hey! what d'ye soy?" he cried.

And he slapped her on the back with the rough playfulness common among rude men, and threw himself into an exaggerated attitude of dancing.

"Hyaw! hyaw! hyaw! hyar's the twenty-eighth, an' nothin' broke yit! Eh! my gal? The ole man's gittin' saft in the upper story. Dumb fool!—that's what's the matter with him—dumb fool!"

He went outside the shanty and drank in the fresh, cool, bracing mountain air of the early morning in deep, delicious inhalations.

He looked about with a chuckle of satisfaction, as if there was for him a new glow on the face of nature.

Surely the glory among the eastern hill-tops was not an every-day commonplace! And how brilliant the air was, how green the trees, after the drenching rain.

"Dumb fool!" he chuckled, slapping his thigh, and winking to himself in congratulation.

"Who's this hyar young high-cock-a-lorum? He ain't huntin' no coon, he ain't! He ain't raisin' blind, he ain't! The keerds ain't out what'll knock the ole man's hefty hand—oh, no, McGlory! We calls for a new deck on the Twenty-eighth, ye onderstand, an' goes in fresh fur a twelve-nonth, anyway."

"The ole man lost his grip bad, an' shook his whisky, I'll be blowed! Hyaw! hyaw! hyaw! Hev to make it up somehow. Dumb fool—an' that's the Lord's truth!"

But his experience of the past night had made a new man of him in more respects than one. For a wonder he was assailed by a keen craving for food instead of for drink.

He went into the shanty where Sarry Ann was preparing his breakfast.

It would not have been an appetizing repast for an Eastern epicure, or indeed for one who was used to fair living in almost any civilized community.

It consisted of bacon and corn-bread, with molasses, and coffee that made up in quantity what it lacked in quality.

The "hog-meat" was frizzling and frying and curling up, and throwing off a rank smoke that made Sarry Ann's eyes water. The "corn-dodger"—Well, that was the most tempting part of the "lay-out;" for it was golden-yellow within and russet-brown without. As for the molasses, there is no disguising the fact—it was black! One couldn't help feeling that it was a pity anything so vile should pass Sarry Ann's pretty lips.

But Old Flip was not "finikin" in his taste. What he ate bore so small a proportion to what he drank, that it was hardly worth bothering about.

Now, as he drew near the fireplace, he rubbed his hands and said "Ah!" as if the sight of the

preparing viands made his mouth water as freely as his rheumy old eyes.

"I'm goin' fur to celebrate to-day, Sarry Ann," he said laughingly. "I'm goin' fur to give my ole gizzard a picnic—blow me ef I ain't! I'm goin' fur to put down a squar' meal without nary drap fur to nail it to the bottom o' my stomach."

Sarry Ann made no reply. What was the use of saying that she wished he would do so always?

"I say, gal," he went on presently, with a covert glance at her face, "ye thought that the ole man was gittin' 'em ag'in last night, didn't ye?"

"What was the matter?" asked Sarry Ann.

"The ole man with the poker!" replied Old Flip gravely.

It was as well to let her think that. She would forget the circumstances the sooner.

Old Flip bolted his food like a hungry dog, declaring:

"A man don't want no better linin' to his in'ards than this hyar, now you'd better b'lieve. You're a hull team an' a yaller dorg under the wagon, my gal, when it comes to slingin' red-hot grub at a feller. Thar's some as swabs the pot with wagon-grease; an' ef thar's anything wo'sen thar slumgudgeon, it's thar slobscouse; an' ef thar's anything wo'sen thar slobscouse, it's thar slumgudgeon. But that ain't you, that ain't. You've got pot-wrasslin' down to a fine pint, you hev. Not but what you're fitten fur better things, my gal. I allow, now, ef you was to rake the States with a fine-tooth comb, you wouldn't find nothin' neater in the petticoat line than my gal Sarry Ann."

Perhaps few men could have turned a compliment more roughly than Old Flip did; but his eyes spoke more eloquently. They beamed with genuine admiration; they bespoke his pride in "his gal." And when she passed near him, he reached out and patted her on the back fondly.

Alas! so little affection was there in the girl's dreary life, that even this rude manifestation caused her to blush with pleasure.

But it was only embarrassment that found expression in her words.

"That's all right, if you haven't any fault to find," she said.

But the old man did not hear her. He held a scrap of bacon suspended between his mouth and his plate, while he stared through the open door, the look of terror of the night before in his eyes, and his jaw dropped.

At the same instant Sarry Ann noticed that a shadow had fallen athwart the floor; and turning with a thrill of apprehension, she saw the figure of a strange man framed in the doorway.

It was none other than our friend, Pancake Pete.

Standing on the flag without, he leaned in through the doorway, supporting himself with a hand on either jamb, while he stared at Old Flip with a broad grin of amused curiosity.

"Waal, I swar!" he ejaculated.

Old Flip was too much overpowered to make reply. He looked as if he had been paralyzed in the attitude in which the shock found him, so that at a push he would fall out of his chair like a wooden dummy.

It flashed through Sarry Ann's mind at once that this man was the occasion of the scene of the previous night.

But her high courage was not to be daunted. She was ready to do battle to the death, if need were.

"Who are you, sir; and what do you want?" she demanded.

Pancake Pete turned toward her as if he had not perceived her until she spoke.

"How air you, m'am?" he said, with emphasis.

And he doffed his hat with a grand salam, slapping his thigh with it.

"We don't know you!" was Sarry Ann's way of intimating that his presence there was an intrusion.

"But that's easy mended, my dear," said Pancake Pete, cheerfully. "It'll only take time to git better acquainted; an' the more you know o' me the better you'll like me. I'm Pancake Pete, the Pride o' the Perairies. I'm a perambulating poker-player with a pack in my pocket. I'll put a penny in the pot an' play ye fur p'int, or pull my pile an' pit Pancake Pete ag'in the purtiest prodigy ye kin perjure in the place. I'm a peaceable pilgrim, but I'm pinin' fur to peel an' pluck some party of his plunder. Oh, I'm prayin' like a parson as pounds a pulpit fur Peter's pence—I'm prayin' fur prey!"

"See here, my pe-culiar friend," interrupted Sarry Ann, setting Pancake Pete down for a "blowhard," and meeting him on his own ground, "if you've come rancin' around here for pay-dirt, you'd better push on. We don't pan out anything here but—politeness. Do you perceive? Puckachee!"

Pancake Pete stared at the girl who picked him up so cleverly. Then he looked at Old Flip, as if for sympathy in his enjoyment of the joke, and slapping his thigh with his hat, threw his head back, and opened his mouth to its widest extent in a pantomime laugh.

Finally, he crossed the threshold and approach-

ed Old Flip, making huge strides, with an exaggerated show of walking on tip-toe.

The old bummer sat motionless, dreading some direful tragedy under this seeming farce, yet powerless to resist or escape.

But, gaining his side, Pancake Pete only nudged him in the ribs with his thumb, and said, in a confidential whisper:

"She's ole persimmons, ain't she? Haw! haw! haw! haw!"

Now Sarry Ann's fears were renewed. Why did this stranger persist in coming into the house? Why was her father so overcome?

With the quickness of a panther she sprung to a side wall and snatched a revolver from a shelf.

"I believe that you are here for no good purpose," she said, with no trace of fear in her clear, keen gaze. "If you lift a finger against my father, I'll call you in!"

Neither did the intruder betray any fear.

"I?—me?—Pancake Pete?" he cried, lifting his eyebrows in astonishment, and pointing with his finger against his breast. "We, Us & Co. strike the ole gent? Why, marm, ye're out—ye're 'way out! Look me over, an' size me up ag'in."

And seizing the skirts of his coat and holding them out at either side, he turned round and round for inspection.

"I'm a good-lookin' animile; an' I'll wash!" he assured her. "I'm gentle an' I'm kind; an' you'll never, never find a more solider, broader-based, squarer-toed ole stick-in-e-mud than yours on call, with gold, or steel, or lead!"

And he looked honestly desirous that she should accept his good intentions.

Sarry Ann was puzzled again.

"What are you here for, anyway?" she demanded.

"Waal, marm," replied Pancake Pete, hitching up his trousers and rolling his quid into the other cheek, as if preparatory to an attempt to clear up a very abstruse subject, "that's what ye asked before. To tell ye the God's truth, an' put it in short meter, I've jest had my mornin's mornin' this mornin'; an' I took it into my ole topknot to come over an' take a look at a galoot what'll run away from his whisky. I never seen nothin' like that in the country whar I come from. They do all the runnin' t'other way—oh, yes!—in old Missouri! Haw! haw! haw!"

Then, turning to Old Flip:

"I 'lowed you'd git to feelin' bad about that, ole man—free whisky, ye onderstand!—so I jest brung your share along in my pocket."

And drawing forth a flat black bottle, he held it up for the admiration of the astonished old bummer.

"Put it away, pard, whar it'll keep; an' never go temptin' Providence by shakin' good whisky."

Old Flip began to smile at once, and looked as if he was "almost persuaded" that Pancake Pete was what he professed to be—a boon companion with a grudge against no man.

But Sarry Ann flushed hotly with anger at seeing her father's worst foe thus thrust under his very nose.

"Look hyer, stranger!" she cried, in her anger falling into the dialect from which, for a reason which will appear in due time, her speech was ordinarily free, "you light out o' hyer! You're in the way! I want to drive a nail just whar you stand! And to show you that I know how—"

The sentence was concluded by a ringing report from the weapon which she held.

With a cry of pain Pancake Pete sprang sideways, putting his hand to his face, and fell headlong across the threshold.

CHAPTER X.

"JOHN."

"SARRY ANN!" screamed Old Flip, at last finding voice in his dismay and leaping to his feet. "What fur did you lay out that pilgrim?"

"Oh, I haven't hurt him much," said the girl. Yet she looked anxiously at the fallen "Pride o' the Perairies."

"You've plugged him plumb-center!" cried Old Flip.

"Keep yer shirt on, ole man!" recommended the prostrate poker-player. "Pancake Pete ain't purpared fur Purgatory yet!"

And as much to the relief of Sarry Ann as of her father he picked himself up.

"Thar ain't nothin' snide about your slight, marm," he said, wiping his eyes with his sleeve; "but ef you'd 'a' told me ye had a grudge ag'in' the bottle, I'd 'a' held it a mite further off from my mug, while you experimented in your truly novel way o' drawin' the cork."

Sarry Ann had fired her bullet through the bottle, not forecasting that its force would send bits of glass and spatters of whisky into Pancake Pete's face and eyes.

In starting back he had tripped and fallen.

"I allow a galoot is happier when he has blood in his eye than when it's whisky," observed Pete, taking matters quite philosophically.

But Old Flip, now that his apprehensions for Sarry Ann were over, was looking ruefully at the fragments of the bottle and the whisky spilled on the floor.

"I didn't go to fix you that way, stranger," said Sarry Ann, apologetically.

"Don't say another word!" urged Pete. "I'm jest happy!"

"But," persisted the girl, "I reckon you'd better pull out of here. We haven't any call for you, nor you for us."

"Ef you say so, miss," said Pete, submissively, "I allow so it is. Ye have sich a loud way o' talkin'!"

And once more doffing his hat he bowed himself out of the shanty backward.

"But," he called through the doorway, "I've l'arned a lesson, an' that's a fact. When a galoot runs away from his whisky, fight shy of him!"

"But, pard," called Old Flip after him, earnestly, "I hain't nothin' ag'in' whisky—I hain't!"

"I reckon not!" laughed Pancake Pete.

"Waal, I'll see ye later!"

And he took himself off.

Old Flip turned back into the shanty to see if any of the precious liquor could be saved in some chance hollow fragment of the bottle; but Sarry Ann was already sweeping them into the fireplace.

"See here, father!" she said, peremptorily, "you've been lounging about long enough for one spell. Now something's got to be done. There isn't a scrap of anything more to eat in the house, nor a grain of dust to get it with."

"But Brown'd order hang ye up fur a leetle mite o' somethin'," suggested the old man.

"The slate's broke!"

"What! has Brown gone back on Ole Flip? Why, I sot him up in the business! Wasn't it my find that put his feet under him?"

"But that was a long time ago. He says you can't expect to live on that forever."

"Waal, then, thar's them Heathen Chinee. Who salted that thar mine, an' roped 'em fur a purty stake, I want to know? Didn't Brown git his divvy out o' that speculation?"

Sarry Ann frowned with annoyance. It was not pleasant to be reminded of her father's rascality in this matter-of-course way.

But argue the case as he might, the fact remained—"the slate was broken."

Old Flip went off inveighing bitterly against the ungratefulness of men.

With the thought of the Heathen in his mind he resolved to go where they were pecking away with Oriental patience, and see if he couldn't "make a raise" out of them in some way.

The camp of the Celestials was a veritable beehive. Some were busy with pick and shovel; some were carrying the "pay-dirt" in willow baskets; some were industriously rocking the cradle with one hand while they bailed water into it with the other.

Old Flip's advent was the signal for a marked exhibition of the hospitality for which "John" is noted.

"Hi! you, Ola Flippe, you likee hab littee tlalkee 'long John? John he much likee hab tlalkee 'long you. You come hab one cup tea. John he hab one cup alla same."

And Old Flip was seized upon by a grinning Celestial, as if his visit were esteemed a great honor, and in the excess of his hospitality John would have dragged him into one of the tents and placed the best in his larder before him.

But Old Flip was not partial to tea, and as for the rest, he had just "got outside of a square meal," as we know.

"Hang yer tea!" he growled, resisting the pressing invitation of his host. "I've come to see what you've got in yer rifle-boxes. Blow me ef I don't b'lieve ye swindled me an' my pards out o' this hyar claim. You infernal rats oughter divvy up a royalty, ur ground rent, ur somethin' ur other, quarterly, an' I've come to levy the last quarter's pay—yes I have!"

Whereupon the Celestials waxed greatly excited. Several gathered about him, and attested their honesty by every pledge that a heathen could give to a Christian of Old Flip's stamp.

They assured him that their one ambition was to show him every honor. They ran for the tea and the most tempting viands in their store, pressing them upon him with every mark of respect, each vying with his fellows in the praises of the particular thing that he offered.

But Old Flip marched straight up to the nearest cradle, demanding a pan with the preeminence of an Oriental despot.

With a piece of horn he scraped out the washings that had lodged above the rifle-bars, until he had collected in his pan what he wanted.

During this process all work in the camp stopped. The pagans stood like men who yielded to an inexorable fate.

"I'll show ye a trick or two about cleanin' up," said Old Flip, as he proceeded. "You won't send no bones back to China with this hyar, you bet!"

Sinking his pan in the little pool which the Chinamen were glad to use over and over for their operations, he swung it round and round with the peculiar motion which runs off the clay while permitting the heavier particles of precious mineral to settle at the bottom.

The Chinamen looked on in silence. Their blank faces told that this was to them a graver matter than the loss of a few panfuls of pay-dirt.

When he had washed away all of the clay,

leaving a black sand in the bottom of his pan, Old Flip examined it with eye and fingers, and suddenly uttered an ejaculation of surprise and delight.

"I knowed it! I knowed it! you copper-bottomed frauds!" he shouted, rising to his feet and appearing to be in a great rage.

The Chinamen shrugged their shoulders, and declared:

"John he catchee so littee dust, he not clean up this long teem."

"I'll do yer cleanin'-up fur ye after this!" cried Old Flip; an' I'll see that it's done reg'lar, now don't ye furgit it!"

And he stalked over to where they were digging and took a panful of earth that had not been through the cradle.

Upon washing this his suspicions were confirmed. In the claim that he and his pards had thought worthless, and had "salted" in order to sell to the Chinamen, John had "struck it rich."

"You innercent humbugs!" he growled, glaring at them as if they had done him a personal injury.

Then John affected to "come down."

Spreading out his hands and elevating his brows, while he canted his head on one side, the spokesman of the party said:

"You, Culnel Flippee! maybe you find John one customel flo that piece mine? John no gettee glub—stake out that mine. John he salt that mine. John he likee sell that mine. You, Culnel Flippee makee that littee job all litte, John he gib you one big piece that money he git flo that mine."

But Old Flip was as far from accepting such a bribe as he was from believing in the confession of Christian rascality on the part of the Pagan.

"I'll git ye a customer fur that mine so blasted quick it'll make yer head swim!" he declared. "Ye needn't do no more hefty saltin', my cherubs!"

And drawing a revolver, he proceeded to walk backward out of the camp, carrying the pan with the proof of his discovery in the other hand.

The Celestials had no thought of attacking him. But as they saw that he was going off with their precious secret, they became more and more anxious to win him to an amicable association with them.

They finally admitted that the claim had turned out better than they had hoped, and offered to give him the share of five, ten, twenty men, without work, if he would not betray them.

He only flourished his weapon and ordered them off as they flocked after him.

"This hyar country will never be wo'th nothin' fur a white man to live in," he declared, "till you varmint is rubbed out root an' branch!"

Seeing that all efforts were vain, the Celestials desisted, yielding to the inevitable with the stolidity born of their fatalistic religion.

When the old bummer was gone, they fell to chattering wildly. The camp became a perfect bedlam. They rushed about in every direction, pull-hauling and carrying like a nest of ants into which a stick has been wantonly thrust.

But an observant eye would have seen that there was method in their madness. They were securing their valuables about their persons, and secreting what could not be easily carried.

CHAPTER XI.

A "BLIND."

THE moment he was beyond pistol-range Old Flip turned about and set out at a run.

His run was a very shuffling affair, because his legs showed a disposition to get tangled up—probably from the force of habit. Nevertheless he kept right end up, and made very respectable time.

As he ran, his face became first red, and then purple—as much with excitement, it appeared, as with exertion. Indeed, he soon lashed himself into a furious rage; and the way he vilified Chinamen in general, and those in particular who had "swindled" him and his pards, would, if true, have been at least something in extenuation of the extreme measures so much in vogue on the Pacific Slope, to save the country from the swarming hordes of the Flowery Kingdom.

His return to the Riffle was as sensational as his going forth of the night before; but its effect was scarcely as great as it would have been, if he had rushed through the camp pan in hand, as he had left the Celestials.

He had at least had the good sense to put the unseparated gold and sand into his pouch, and throw the pan away, so that there was nothing outwardly to reveal the true cause of the excitement.

"Ye hyear me, boys?" cried an astonished Riffleite. "The ole man hez got 'em, an' he's got 'em bad!"

But, though the crowd of loungers, eager for any "show for fun" to break the monotony of idleness, chaffed him, even calling to him to wait for his whisky, Old Flip would not be stayed by their banter, but made his way straight to Brown's.

Now Brown's was a place of general supplies,

where everything was to be had, from muslin to molasses, and from powder to pick-axes.

It goes without saying then, that there was a crock of free tobacco, the way to which was well known to all of Brown's customers, and that the circle of loungers that congregated there never let that tobacco get above high-water mark.

In this crowd, with nothing to do but smoke, chew, whittle, and knock their heels together—of which they made melancholy amusement, judging from their morose silence—Old Flip woke a ripple of interest, as he burst into their midst and seized Brown by the sleeve, seeking to drag him out through the back door, with an abundance of mysterious gesticulation and the pantomime of excited speech.

But Brown resisted his solicitations, glowering incredulously at his working features, and growled:

"Blast yer! what air ye tryin' to git through ye now?"

"He's jest struck a pocket, an' wants to let ye into a good thing," laughed one of the men.

"He's struck a mare's nest, an' wants to let himself further into my pocket!" growled Brown, with the good-natured indulgence generally extended to the worst bummer in camp, who by that very distinction becomes a privileged character.

"Oh, give 'im a show!"

"I've give him shows o' this kind before, an' always come out o' the leetle end o' the horn."

"That ain't so. I've hyeared Sutter say that he put you up to ringin' in that cold deal on the Heathen."

"He's been tradin' on it ever sense; an' I told his girl only yesterday that the thing was about played."

Nevertheless Brown allowed himself to be led out of the door, though he stopped on the threshold, so that Old Flip had to fairly force him the rest of the way, to close the door.

"Consarn ye!" he whispered, when he had this barrier between his secret and prying ears, "do ye want me to blab the biggest find in a twelve-month to that thar gang o' stoolpigeons?"

"I reckon all the find you've made this time won't trouble nobody in thar sleep. Come! out with it!"

And Brown looked on quite complacently while Old Flip fumbled in his pocket and produced his pouch.

But when the old bummer had poured the specimen into his palm and held it up tremblingly for inspection, Brown took the contagion as powder does a spark.

"What's this hyar, you old fraud?" he cried, under his breath, seizing the outstretched hand and examining its contents eagerly.

"Mebby you'll begin to b'lieve me?" chuckled Old Flip.

"Never you mind whether I do or don't. Whar did you get this hyar? Speak to the p'int, an' don't be long about it!"

Almost in a word Old Flip told his story.

Brown uttered a low, rumbling oath.

"That's enough!" he said, cutting off all details. "But, you infernal fool! do you come routin' up the camp with sich a snap as this hyar? Have you told anybody? I'll murder ye, ef ye hev!"

"D'ye take the ole man fur a mutton-head? Not a livin' soul!"

"Waal, look a-hyar! we've got to play off on this thing. Ef the boys see that I take it in 'arnest, they'll drop like lightnin', an' we'll hev the hull gang at our heels."

"We want the old crowd."

"Don't I know that? But we don't want no more. You leave that to me. An' now you p'int fur home with yer tail between yer legs. D'ye understand?—ef you put a drop inside o' your ole skin between now an' the time we jump them cusses, I'll bore ye, s'elp me!"

"Come! we don't want no more o' this. Take yer cue from me."

Thereupon Brown raised his voice and began to swear, as if in supreme disgust.

"You be blowed! I've had all I want o' this hyar," he said, loud enough to be heard within. "D'ye 'low I make my money listenin' to an ole stoughtonbottle like you, a-chinnin' it all about jest nothin' at all? Nary more tick do you git out o' me, I tell ye. That don't go down."

He opened the door while speaking, and re-entered the store.

Old Flip caught the spirit of the comedy, and followed at his heels looking decidedly chaf-fallen.

"But look a-hyar, pard," he whined, "ye might give a feller three fingers—call it *two* fingers!—fur ole times' sake!"

"I allowed that was what ye was after! Waal, when you git three fingers, ur two fingers, ur one finger, by gee! out o' me, jest let me know—will ye?"

The crowd looked at Brown inquiringly. Assuming that he would gratify their curiosity, none took the trouble to put the question into words.

"The old song," said Brown. "Ef one o' you chaps wants to invest in a bonanza, it's a-goin' dirt cheap. I 'low the ole man'll sell out his full right and title in it fur a glass o' whisky."

"Struck it rich, eh?" one of the crowd exerted himself to say.

"Oh, yes! He's got an idee. The ole man's full of 'em when he gits the shakes on him, an' hez got to raise a sniffer somehow. This hyar's sure to pan out a million a minute, an' he kin lay his hands on it—day after to-morrer!"

The crowd laughed.

"Go out an' git a thimbleful, ole man," suggested one, "an' then come back an' plank yer rocks. Wind's at a discount in these hyar diggin's."

Old Flip received their chaff meekly, in rueful silence.

"Come! trot along!" ordered Brown, and followed him to the door, and fairly put him out. "You jest air yerself up the street a bit."

And by his gestures, those who were not near enough to hear what he said knew that he was ordering the old bummer off.

It soon went the length of the street that Old Flip had tried to ring in a cold deal on Brown, but had come off "nix." So, as he passed along, with an air in such marked contrast with that which had excited the curiosity of the loafers, he was greeted on all sides with a merciless hail of gibes.

He pretended to get "mad," and swore at his persecutors roundly.

That only added to their delight; and when, in seeming high dudgeon, he turned his back upon them and shambled out of camp, he was followed by prolonged hoots.

The mistake of his entrance into the camp was fairly retrieved. Brown was in secret delight, though outwardly he appeared unmoved.

For full half an hour he smoked, only breaking silence for a monosyllable now and then. Indeed, he affected to fall into a doze.

Presently he roused himself, got up, stretched lazily, and declared:

"This hyar's what I call gittin' rather slow. Ain't thar nothin' doin' in this hyar camp, no-whar?"

"Tain't wo'th the huntin' up—that's my notion," volunteered one.

Brown rubbed his scrubby chin, and ventilated one consideration quite frankly.

"I reckon it'll stand me in hand to open up somethin' as'll start you stoolpigeons before you clean me out entirely. I'll take you out an' drop you around among my enemies."

Far from taking this ill, the gang laughed.

One expressed the sentiments of the crowd.

"Ef you kin quarter us on any one as'll treat us as well, an' as often, thar won't be no call to howl."

Without pledging himself to any such office, Brown lifted up his voice and called:

Mag! Oh, Mag!"

Getting no response; he vociferated again:—

"Hey, ole woman!"

"Quit it!" cried an irascible female voice from the back part of the house.

"Hyar! I'm goin' to take a turn down the street."

"Pears like you 'low I hain't nothin' to do o' my own, while you're gallivantin' around at no 'count!"

"I don't feed you fur nothin'!" was Brown's gallant rejoinder.

And with this summary disposal of that question, he sauntered out, followed by such of the gang as had energy or curiosity enough to carry them after.

They lounged down the street in a disordered group, finding nothing of sufficient interest to detain them, until they came upon a crowd looking languidly on at a game of quoits.

Of course horseshoes did service for the classic disks.

But during their ramble Brown had not been idle, though none of his companions suspected that he had any purpose other than their own—to kill time.

But, by some sort of masonry, he had managed to communicate with several idlers whom he selected for his confidence.

None of them gave any sign; but when he had passed on, they quietly slouched off, leaving the camp at different points, and with so little parade that their withdrawal was not noticed.

Brown was the last to get away; and when he had put a mile of crags and timber between him and the Riffle, he found them all assembled at a rendezvous evidently prearranged.

Old Flip was there, acting very mysteriously as if he knew it all, but wasn't disposed to "give it away."

CHAPTER XII.

"JUMPING" THEN HEATHEN.

"WAAL, boss," said one of the gang of "jumpers," addressing their chief, "what's the row, anyway? An' what's the ole man got to do with it?"

"A heap, sonny!" said Old Flip, in his own behalf. "Ye 'low the ole man's no good, don't ye? Waal, when you youngste's larn half what he furgits every day, ye'll put up a thing now an' ag'in on yer own account, 'stid o' waitin' fur yer betters to set up the pins fur you to knock over. Any fool kin do that! It's layin' awake nights fur p'intas as calls fur suthin' in hyar!"

And he tapped his head, to indicate the repository of that wisdom by which they were now to profit.

"You infernal old straddle-legged wind-bag!" growled one of the men, though with a good-natured laugh. "Blow me ef I'd resk any chipson whether your old skin's on the outside o' more gall ur more whisky!"

"Gents," said Brown cutting short this profitless discussion, "air ye ready fur biz?"

"Biz every time!" was the reply.

"Waal, this hyar means blood an' money."

"White blood, pard?"

"Not *this* evenin'! When I'm after men o' my own color, I don't git together no such gang as this hyar *you* bet!"

"Greasers don't count," said one of the men, coolly. "Ef that's yer lay, it'll be a walk-over."

"Nary Greasers. It's Pagans, b'gee!"

"You don't say! Has them blasted cattle struck somethin' worth while?"

"Ain't this the gang what run that claim before they ever struck this hyar country?"

"Blow me ef it ain't! Hyar's Cockeye, an' Long Tom, an' Dancin' Jimmy, an'—"

"Hyar's the hull gang, an' don't ye furgit it!"

"Waal, Cap, we're to wade in an' clean 'em out?"

"Ef we don't want the first lucky crowd that drops to their racket to walk in ahead of us an' git all the fat pickin's."

"We ain't waitin' fur none sich, boss!"

"Air you all agreed?"

"Thar ain't no Heathen sympathizers in this crowd. Drive ahead!"

And Brown did "drive ahead," without more ado.

They went forward like a party of guerrillas making a foray. Every man was properly "heeled," so that no special preparation was necessary.

When they reached the Chinese camp, everything was as still as if the place was deserted. Not a "John" was in sight.

"They're playin' 'possum!" growled Brown, angrily.

"I'll bet they've took warnin' by the racket up at Cedar Forks, an' cut the ranch without waitin' fur no pressin' invite," suggested one of the assailants.

"Don't you fool yerself. I know the dumb varmints better'n that."

"Will we make a surround, an' then jump in an' gobble 'em up?"

"No, we won't. You jest leave me to run this hyar thing."

"Go in, Cap! I'm agreeable."

"What we want, is to run 'em off. It won't do no good to sling no cold meat, ef we kin git along jest as well without it."

"What's the reason it won't?" growled an ugly-looking fellow with a black frown. "I'm out fur blood an' ha'r; an' choke me ef I don't git some! What's the blasted Heathens made fur, I want to know, ef it ain't fur to salt 'em down to keep?"

"You'll do what I say," said Brown, coolly; "ur I'll walk you straight into blue blazes!"

The autocrat looked directly into the eyes of the man who had dared to state what he proposed to do.

It was a challenge which the other lacked the "sand" to meet.

He turned away with a sullen scowl, only muttering below his breath.

In this way had Brown established his authority, and so it was necessary to maintain it.

"We ain't slingin' no cold pig as much as we was," he continued, persistently. "Thar's the Professor dead ag'in it; and we hadn't no call to fetch him down on us, jest fur the fun o' pluggin' Heathen pelts."

Some one of the gang offered a suggestion, looking to the disposal of the Professor, as terse as it was profane.

"That's all right," said Brown; "but we're in this thing fur money; an' I say, never rouse a sleepin' dog."

At a signal, then, they charged the camp with a whoop.

Instantly the Celestials appeared, swarming out of their huts and tents like ants from a hill.

They were at least forty of them, against but half a dozen assailants; yet they fled before the blazing revolvers of the whites in the wildest panic, and without offering the faintest show of resistance.

But for Brown's prohibition, there would have been a ruthless butchery of these defenseless men.

As it was, several were wounded by shots not aimed at a vital part, and more were beaten and forced to drop such of their possessions as they were seeking to escape with.

The assault had lasted but a few minutes, when there was not a Chinaman within sight or hearing, save one poor fellow who was so severely wounded that he lay in sullen despair, waiting for the "Christian devils" to finish their work and put him out of his misery.

But that was not Brown's policy.

"Let the dog lay," he said. "He'll pull out when he gits ready."

Leaving him in this inhuman way, they returned to the camp, and soon had several of the huts in flames.

Then the victors, in full possession, cheered long and loudly over their triumph.

Echoed by the cliffs, the sounds of the onset, followed by the smoke of conflagration, were heard in Silver Riffle; and soon the town fairly emptied itself in the direction of the Celestial camp.

When they reached the spot, they found the despoilers coolly working the claim.

"Waal, I swear! ef this hyar ain't cheeky!" cried one of their number, when it was apparent what had taken place.

"Cheeky nothin'!" retorted Brown. "What have you got to say ag'in' it? This hyar claim belonged to us; an' we sold her to the Heathen on a condition. The ole man hyar ketched 'em a-swindlin' of us, an' we come down on 'em fur our rights. Then they tried to come the bluff game, an' found that they couldn't work no sich snide racket on yours truly. We cleaned 'em out, an' now propose to work our money out o' the thing on our own hook. Ain't that all right, pardner?"

"Oh, yes! it's right enough. I'm only thinkin' o' the cheek o' this hyar ole whisky-soak, the way he played the lot of us fur flats."

"Ye don't git away with yer uncle, boyees!" said Old Flip, complacently.

"But you'll hev one ole-time drunk out o' this thing, Flip?"

"When I've scooped in a thimbleful o' dust, pard!"

This thrust was at the man who had offered him this suggestion two hours since; and those who understood the point roared, and enlightened the rest.

One man who took no pains to keep in the background in this interview was Pancake Pete. Indeed, he pressed himself on Old Flip's notice, slapping him on the back, and assuming the air of a patron who was proud of his *protege*.

"We'll hev you drunker'n a b'iled owl, old hunks!" he declared. "Come to the Inter-ocean to-night, an' we'll make up the whisky ye lost last night—blow me ef we don't!"

"Say, daddy!" he went on, in a confidential whisper, nudging Old Flip in the ribs, "how is she, anyhow? Haw! haw! haw! haw! I tuck a notion to the gal—I did, s'elp me Bob!"

Though strong in his new triumph, Old Flip could not throw off the disconcerting influence of this blatant stranger. Reason as he might that his overtures had all been friendly, instead of hostile, he could not rid himself of the feeling that Pancake Pete's coming to Silver Riffle boded him no good.

All too soon he was to have a confirmation of his fears.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROFESSOR.

ON the morning following her adventure in the canyon of the Silver Riffle, the Mountain Rose followed the path that Gerald Fitzgerald had taken, until it had brought her in sight of the extensive works of a quartz mine.

The air was black with the smoke from its tall chimneys, and the crags reverberated the continuous thunder of its ponderous stamp-mill.

At a little distance stood a slab cottage, rather more pretentious in appearance than the rude shanties in which the miners ordinarily lived.

Toward this abode Sarry Ann directed her steps.

She had scarcely got in sight of it when she discovered the fluttering skirts of a young girl who was running toward her, with an eager smile on her face and the light of glad affection in her eyes.

The latter did not stop until she had thrown herself into Sarry Ann's arms, to hug and kiss her with a warmth that drew a hearty response from the drunkard's daughter.

"Ah, mavourneen! I've been waiting for ye this half hour!" cried the girl; and her voice had had cadences that proclaimed her relationship with Gerald Fitzgerald, though where his was rugged hers was soft and liquid; while there was a faint touch of the brogue "on the tip of her tongue" which did not detract from the sweetness of it.

In all else she was different from her brother. Her hair was black, and lay as smooth and glossy as a raven's wing. Her eyes were a dark, witching blue—the merriest eyes that ever danced with delight.

With arms intertwined the girls proceeded to the house, chatting gayly.

Nora Fitzgerald had no other thought than the prospect of their days among the crags; but Sarry Ann glanced covertly about in quest of some object which, however, she did not see.

"Nora! Nora! Did I ever see the like of ye? Where are ye?" called a voice from within doors.

"Here I am, father," was the cheery response. "And here's Nannie, too—the darling!"

The figure of an old gentleman in a long linen duster, and with a silk cap on his head, appeared in the doorway.

He wore spectacles and had the scholar's stoop of the shoulders. His silvery hair, falling to his shoulders, gave him a gentle, benign look.

"Well! well! here's a sight for failing eyes!" he said, smiling at the girls. "You don't know, my dears, what a fine thing it is to be young."

"Youth! youth!" he repeated to himself, with a faint sigh. "Anything can be done with youth and health and stren'th!"

"Well!" in a more sprightly tone, "are we all ready?"

"As quick as I get my botanizing box!" cried Nora, with the excitement of anticipated pleasure.

And into the house she sped with the agility of a mountain kid.

The Professor was carrying a square tin box by a handle in the lid, which Sarry Ann took from him as a matter of course.

He patted her on the head, her bonnet slipped off, to hang unheeded on her back by the strings, and stroked her hair affectionately, saying:

"It does the heart good to see yez looking so brave this morning. Sure, it's the red cheeks that are the finest cosmetics."

Sarry Ann blushed under his praise, and sought to divert his attention from her.

When Nora reappeared like a meteor, they set out on their quest of geological specimens, Sarry Ann walking beside the Professor with an attentiveness which had long since made him call her his other daughter.

The happiest hours of his life had been passed in the society of these people; and here was the secret of her refinement, in such marked contrast with her home surroundings. With them she found the higher life which she instinctively craved; and with the true delicacy of high breeding, they had never shown by word or look that they were conscious of any difference between her or them.

Her father was asked after with a kindness that ignored his fatal weakness.

The intensity of the girl's grateful love for this priceless boon of fellowship would have astonished the simple-hearted people who gave of their abundance without thinking of its value, but that a certain proud reserve, native with her, held the expression of her feelings in dignified restraint.

With Gerald it had been somewhat different. She had never fairly coupled him in her thoughts with his father and sister. She had never felt that she owed him gratitude.

She had always supposed that she "liked" him as Nora's brother, always until that moment when, in the canyon, he held her in his arms, and she felt his heart beat high with excitement, and the warmth of his breath on her cheek.

There had come a revelation which had startled while it delighted her; and afterward, with reflection, had come a poignancy of bitter pain like nothing she had ever known even in her sad life.

The effect of that long sleepless night had not yet been lifted from her spirits. It made her now shy and silent beyond her wont. It kept that constant glow in her cheek which had called forth the professor's admiration; but had he seen her before she came within sight of the Lucky Venture mine, he must have been struck by her pallor and almost haggard look.

If she had hoped, or feared, that Gerald would present himself, she was disappointed.

Without putting it into definite words, she told herself that, as overseer of the mine, he could not be expected to dance attendance upon any young lady who happened to join his father and sister in their ramble over the mountains, which, however engrossing to them, had no business importance whatever. Still, she was disappointed. She had expected him.

Suppose—suppose—he did not care! But why should he? Of course there was no reason why he should—no reason at all; except that—well, he had looked at her so!

Her heart quailed with a delicious terror every time she recalled the expression in his eyes—the expression that had caused hers to close again for an instant, as if under a mesmeric spell.

Still he had not come to greet her. All day long that thought made her feel cold and forlorn. And at every mark of affection from Nora or her father, she could scarcely restrain her tears.

The Professor's enthusiasm in his study and Nora's delight over the rare flowers she culled made them oblivious to the flight of time; and they did not return home until the shrill whistle at the stamp-mill had blown the noon hour.

Nora had chided herself all the way back on the prospect of Gerald having to eat his dinner without them. This kept her from noticing the unusual reluctance with which Sarry Ann yielded to her insistence that she go back with them.

As they neared the house, Gerald appeared running toward them, fluttering an envelope above his head.

"A letter! a letter!" cried Nora, darting toward him.

"Guess who!" laughed Gerald, holding it beyond her reach.

"Oh, I can't!" cried Nora, stamping her feet and clapping her hands with eager impatience. "Give it to me at once! You sha'n't keep it!"

And she fairly climbed upon him, in her efforts to secure the prize.

"Nan, will ye see me mauled like this? Ouch! is it the hair ye'd be fetching away?"

"You've opened it; and it belonged to me!" cried Miss Nora, greatly abused.

"Wasn't it a telegram?" pleaded Gerald, in justification. "Faith! did I know but some great-uncle or other o' yours, somewhere in the wurld, was at the point o' death, and waiting to leave you a fortune?"

"Oh! oh! oh!" screamed Nora, jumping up and down with delight, after a glance through the dispatch. "Was there ever sweeter news than this? What do ye think, father? Oh! you'd never guess—never a time—not you!"

"You'll be telling me, then, an' that will save me the trouble," said the Professor, with an indulgent smile.

"Nanny, it's the sweetest lady you ever saw!" cried Nora, who always had every one about her share in her delights.

"It's Miss Champney that's coming to see us, father," interposed Gerald.

"Now, Mr. Gerald Fitzgerald," cried his sister, with a pretty pout, "I don't thank you for telling my news!"

"It's a long time they be getting it out o' the likes of you!" laughed Gerald. "Now, when I have a thing to tell, I out with it, and have done."

"Well, I tell what I have to tell in the way that pleases me best."

"It's out now, at any rate, and no bones broke."

"What's this ye have, Nan?"

And he took the specimen box from her hand, exclaiming, when he felt its weight:

"Well, I never! You're after loading yerself down like a pack-mule. Ye should carry a boy o' my size along, when ye want to bring home the side of a mountain."

He walked at her side, while Nora besieged her father with plans for the entertainment of their expected guest.

All of a sudden Sarry Ann found herself mistress of herself, with a new power which she had never before suspected. Her cheeks did not flame, nor did her ears burn, nor did she hang her head with the bashful self-betrayal of a lovelorn rustic.

No lady in the land could have been more perfectly self-possessed. She was rather paler than usual, and she could not meet Gerald's eyes with the old unconscious steadiness; that was all.

She heard what he said to her, and replied rather aimlessly. The fact was, she had one ear for Nora's rhapsody to her father, which was broken into every once in a while with a word addressed to her. But the theme of these outbursts was always the beauty and grace and wonderful cleverness of the fair San Franciscan.

Sarry Ann had heard all about her a hundred times before, but now she listened with a new interest. She already knew that Nora and Miss Champney had been fellow-pupils, one at the beginning while the other was near the close of her boarding-school life.

The daughter of a runaway match, in which a foolish girl had linked her fate with that of her father's coachman—a man who afterward made three or four fortunes in as many different parts of the world, to lose them as suddenly as they were made, and had finally fallen in a duel with a French count—such in outline was the story whispered about among the girls of the seminary; Miss Champney had had a lover while yet a school-girl, and had crowned her life of romantic vicissitude by going on the stage.

Nora's fancy had been fired. She thought the theater a sort of Paradise of forbidden delights; and La Blanchette was her one heroine.

Further, Sarry Ann knew that Miss Champney was the plaintiff in a suit at law against the proprietor of the Lucky Venture Mine. Knowing absolutely nothing personally about Colonel Wallingford, Sarry Ann had imbibed the partizanship of the Riffle, and to her it had seemed almost like open treason for the sister of Colonel Wallingford's overseer to be so enthusiastically attached to his enemy.

But now the question arose: What was Gerald's attitude toward this wonderfully clever woman?

From his talk, she gathered that he knew next to nothing about his sister's friend. He had seen her, and the sight of her—*Had* it turned his head?

Why did he speak slightly of her, calling out such hot vindication from Nora?

"She's a clever woman, but ancient—very ancient!" he said, with a laugh.

"Old!" cried Nora. "Why, she is just your age, within a month!"

"In whose favor?" asked Gerald, coolly.

"Wouldn't you like to know? You've got out of me more than you have any business to know already."

"She's quite an old maid, ye see," said Gerald to Sarry Ann. "I've turned twenty-five this many a day!"

At eighteen years of age twenty-five seemed a long way ahead to Sarry Ann; and the age of

the actress had an oddly soothing effect. She heard with complacency the arrangement for Gerald to ride to the nearest railway station and escort Miss Champney on horseback to the Riffle.

But in the midst of this planning there came a startling and painful interruption.

With a flutter and flapping of loose garments a Chinaman rushed up to the Professor and cast himself at his feet to cling to his knees and beg for protection.

The poor fellow was ghastly with terror and bleeding from several wounds.

Nora screamed and pressed her hand to her heart. The drunkard's daughter, of finer metal, stood white and still.

"Och, murder! and what's this?" cried the Professor, bending down to put his trembling hands on the suppliant.

"There's been foul work here!" said Gerald, with darkening brow. "Stand up like a man. There's no one will harm you here."

"John" was lifted to his feet, but in his excitement his "pidgin" English was scarcely intelligible. With clasped hands he appealed to father and son alternately; and they managed to gather the fact that the claim had been "jumped."

"Oh, this is shameful!" cried Nora, with generous indignation. "Father, can't those vile ruffians be driven out and these poor fellows be protected in their rights? Gerald, you have men enough under you to see that justice is done."

But Gerald stood silent and grim.

It was his father who replied for him sadly. "My boy's heart is in the right place," he said, with his gentle pride in his son. "But how many men could he get to stand at his back in defense of the Heathen?"

"Lord! Lord!" he went on, in a lower tone, in a way that he had of speaking his thoughts aloud, "but they put us arrogant Christians to shame!"

It was arranged that the wounded Celestial should stay at the cottage; while Gerald declared his intention to go to the Riffle and see what had happened and if anything could be done about it.

It is needless to say that his errand was fruitless. Public sentiment was unanimous against him. In the abstract, the thing was a bare-faced theft, of course; but the Pagan had no rights that a Christian was bound to respect. They were ruining the country and it wouldn't do to be nice about the means of getting rid of them.

Sarry Ann had the shame of knowing that her father was foremost in this act of wrong.

But there was one who declared delightedly that this "brought grist to his mill." It was the Marshal of Silver Riffle, Cap Ledyard.

Let us see the devil's meal that he proceeded to grind out of it.

CHAPTER XIV.

CORRALING THE HEATHEN.

ONE perquisite of the office of marshal was, that if Cap Ledyard now and then did a little job on his own personal account, it went in with the rest. Public and private vengeance were never nicely discriminated. If any one knew the difference, it was "none of his funeral," and he "kept his mouth shut."

To carry out his will, he had a precious gang of ruffians at his back, whom he paid out of the plunder he got, like any pirate, and protected them beneath the mantle of his office.

On the night following the jumping of the Celestial's claim, they slipped out of the Riffle with altogether unusual precautions.

They were mounted; and, once clear of the camp, they rode off through the mountains at a brisk trot.

At a distance of eight or ten miles they slowed up, and sent out scouts in advance.

Soon the discovery for which they were on the lookout was made, and then every precaution of a meditated surprise was observed.

They had come upon as desolate a bivouac as one could wish to see. The "bounced" Celestials were huddled about a fire, dressing their wounds and bemoaning their hard luck.

In the midst of their wretchedness a deep base voice, coming out of the darkness, said, quietly:

"Waal, John, we've come fur ye!"

With ejaculations of alarm, they started up and gazed about.

Just within the range of the firelight they saw a circle of men—Christian devils, as they called them—standing grim and implacable.

The polished barrels of their revolvers flashed back the firelight. There was no question as to their hostile attitude. There was no hope of their mercy. The weaker was crowded to the wall. He stood in dull despair, yielding without a murmur to the inevitable.

"Go in thar, two or three o' ye, an' truss 'em up," commanded Cap Ledyard.

Coolly the men charged with this duty walked forward, and bound the unresisting Celestials, two and two, by the wrist.

"Now, John," said the marshal, "ye ain't goin' fur to raise no yep, ye onderstand; ur we'll take the clapper out o' yer auction bell, an' don't you furgit it! See?"

"John good John," said the leader of the Pagans, despondently. "No makee bad pidgin long that 'Melica' man."

"That's all right," said Cap. "You keep yer mouths shut, an' I'm yer solid friend. But jest you set up a caterwaulin', an' I'll plant ye so deep that thar won't no bones get back to China out o' this crowd! Now, all *chassez!*"

The march back toward the scene of their recent wrong was a most painful one for the prisoners. They were hurried forward like a drove of cattle.

"Come! step along thar—lively!" urged Cap upon a lagging pair. "We can't be all night gittin' you into quarters. Blast the cattle! what did they go so fur for?"

More than a mile from the Riffle he turned from the road, and then followed an exhausting as well as perilous scramble through a pathless wilderness of crags.

After not a few distressing bruises, the victims of this new outrage arrived, more dead than alive, before what appeared to be the mouth of a cave.

As a fact, it was an old drift, long since abandoned and forgotten—the same through which, years ago, the boy, Sidney Sloper, had gained access to the Little Cassie Mine, to become a witness of a tragedy that had gone unrequited to this day.

The Celestials entered here as into a tomb. They could form no idea as to what awaited them.

Within, the moment their taskmasters intimated that they might now dispose of themselves as they chose, they cast themselves upon the ground, and sunk into an exhausted stupor, indifferent to their fate.

"An' now," said Cap, "thar's one bird missin' an' he's at the Professor's. I useter 'low that I hadn't no use fur that lily-fingered gent; but now I reckon he'll sarve my turn a heap."

And he chuckled at the thought of how he was going to make the last man who would do such a thing wittingly, play into his hand.

A small party of picked men accompanied him on his next, more delicate mission.

Like coyotes prowling about a hunter's camp, on the alert for a chance to steal a piece of meat or even a boot from under the head of a sleeper, they crept upon the cottage occupied by the overseer of the Lucky Venture Mine.

When they were quite close to it, a signal, in imitation of the cry of a night bird, brought a like response.

A moment later a dark shadow rose in Cap Ledyard's path.

"Waal," whispered the marshal, "is our bird put to roost whar we kin git him by the legs an' gullet?"

"You bet!" was the low reply.

"Whar is he?"

"In yon outhouse."

"Good! I've robbed hen-roosts on the old Ohio, in raffin' days; an' I never seen nothin' purtier'n that. We'll snake him out o' thar so slick, they'll 'low he's slid off on a greased pole. Is he in any kind o' shape fur transportation?"

"Oh, I reckon! The Professor's young lady has been a-plasterin' of him up; an' the bed-clo's she throwed away on the varmint is jest sinful."

"That's all right. We ain't growlin'. The more coddlin' he got, the better fur us."

"Go slow, now, boys. Ef we git ketched in this hyar, it knocks the hull thing in the head."

Without another sound they crept up to the outbuilding.

It was a tool-house, in which was also stored horse-feed and other provisions. No particular precautions had been taken to make it secure, since petty larceny was not much to be apprehended. The door fastened with a wooden latch. Its one window, in consequence of the occupancy of the Chinaman, had been left open.

Up under this window crept Cap Ledyard, to listen.

Within, he heard the breathing of the sufferer occasionally passing into a low moan. He moved restlessly now and then, and half awoke, to lapse again into slumber, as was indicated by the renewed regularity of his breathing.

"That's our meat, as easy as downin' a glass o' Jerry Judkins's best!" muttered Cap, with satisfaction.

He looked about, to see that his men were all properly disposed; then he drew off his boots.

Three others followed his example. Then, with them close at his back, he lifted the latch, and glided into the tool-house as noiselessly as a shadow.

Those outside waited in suspense.

There was a moment of deathlike stillness; then was borne to their ears a slight, quickly-suppressed scuffling sound; lastly, the voice of their leader, a deep, hoarse growl, full of deadly menace.

"Hold on, John! We've got you, my boy! Quit it, blast ye! ur I'll slit yer wizzand!"

Within the ruffians had crept upon the sleeper, un'il all four precipitated themselves upon him at once.

The great point was to prevent the slightest noise that could rouse the people in the cottage. So Cap Ledyard took upon himself the most important office. His broad hand closed down upon the mouth of his victim like a vise, while

the others cast themselves upon the body, to prevent the tossing of an arm or leg.

What words can describe the wild terror of the poor wretch, who, even in the first frenzied struggle, found that he could not move a muscle—that he was forced to lie there panting and glaring into the darkness at the dusk figure that bent over him, while he felt the hot breath of his unknown assailant on his face?

He knew that they were "Christian devils"—the same, he supposed, that had already made a murderous assault upon him and his companions, to rob them of their good fortune, after having previously beset them with fraud.

What next? It must be wanton murder! Well he knew what had befallen his unhappy countrymen. Not content with killing them outright, their savage persecutors could not be appeased short of torture. He believed that he was to be abducted from the slight protection of those who had befriended him, to be hanged, and probably burned, in the midst of a howling mob at Silver Riffle.

Powerless, he ceased to struggle.

"Now, look hyar, John," said Cap. "You know me. I'm the Marshal o' Silver Riffle. An' when I tell ye that you ain't goin' fur to come to no harm by us, you may bet yer bottom dollar that that's so. But we're 'lowin' to run you an' your crowd out o' this hyar section o' country—bet yer life! An' we're 'lowin' to run ye off easy, ur plant ye. D'ye hyear? An' we don't reckon that this hyar Professor's goin' fur to put in no gab in the matter, nuther! Now, I'm goin' fur to unbutton yer lip; but you'd better be dog-keerful how ye use it. D'ye feel the p'int o' this hyar knife on yer neck? Waal, I'll jab it into ye through to the backbone, ef ye come any yelp game on me! I want you to answer a straight question. Will you go out o' hyar without no row; or shall we make cold pig out o' you first, an' then lug ye out by the feet?"

He removed his hand from the mouth of the terrified Celestial, and awaited his answer with the point of his bowie stinging the skin just over the jugular vein.

For a moment "John" lay gasping, unable to speak. But presently he found voice to murmur faintly:

"Good John. No makee bobberty 'long that 'Melica' man."

"That show's whar *your* head's level!"

"Hopple him, boys. They're an infernal slippery lot."

In pursuance of this order, the Chinaman's feet were tied, with a play of rope sufficient so that he could walk easily, but so that he would instantly trip himself up on attempting to run. Besides this, a loop was slipped over one wrist, which afforded his guard a secure hold upon him.

"An' jest keep the muzzle of yer revolver to his head, as a gentle reminder, Jim," said Cap.

"Buckeye," he went on, to another of his satellites, "pass them blankets on the outside. The little miss will think her pet has made off with 'em."

Then he began to sniff.

"Thar's bacon hyar, boys," he said. "That's right in our line. We want 'em to 'low that the John's friends has come fur him, an' helped 'emself to what they could find, bein's as they was short o' grub."

Feeling about in the darkness, they found the meat hanging from the rafters, and passed it rapidly through the door and window, until they were all fairly loaded down with "plunder."

"John" came in for his share of this portage, without any consultation of his scruples as to robbing his benefactors.

"You'll help to eat it, blast ye!" said Cap, not angrily, but because it was difficult for him to express himself without throwing in an occasional forcible expletive; "so I allow you've a right to pack your share."

"Waal, now, maybe the Professor an' his crowd won't b'lieve these hyar Chinees is low-down hounds, to slide off in the night with his fodder, after his young lady has played the Good Samaritan to one on 'em! Haw! haw! haw!"

"But they'll hev more'n that to think about before they git through with it—ye hyear me?"

So, as silently as they had come, they stole away, leaving this lying impression behind them.

"John" was added to his companions, who were too miserable themselves to congratulate him on his escape from death, which they had supposed to be his fate.

"And now," said Cap, "for the last o' the critters. This"—referring to the bacon—"is smoked pig—smoked after it's butchered. Now we're in fur some as was smoked first, an' butchered afterwards."

The subject of his joke proved to be a Chinaman whom the jumpers had wounded so severely that he could not get away.

Gerald had not heard of this case: so the poor fellow yet lay neglected in his misery.

"Blast his eyes!" muttered Cap, when he came upon him groaning, "he hain't passed in his copper cash yet."

"D'ye want him cold, Cap?" asked one of

his men, none of whom as yet had any idea of the use to which he purposed to put the men he had been at such pains to "corral."

"You bet I do."

"We'll have to cool him off, then."

"We won't hev to do nothin' else."

"Shall we knock him in the head now?"

"I reckon not jest yet awhile. Come to think, I don't know but this hyar's lucky."

"Whar's the luck?"

"Why, he'll keep this way, ef we hev to wait any time fur our market. We want to leave fresh pig, ye onderstand."

The men laughed brutally.

"Pick him up, an' fetch him along," said Cap. "But I reckon we won't take him in to his gang. It'll be jest as well, maybe, ef they don't know that we found him kickin'."

So a new retreat was found for the sufferer; and after a sufficient guard had been left over him and his companions, Cap Ledyard, with the rest of his men, crept back to the Riffle to be snugly in bed before daybreak.

The Fitzgeralds believed themselves the victims of ingratitude; but tender-hearted Nora was ready with excuse.

"I suppose he was afraid to stay," she said. "And, poor fellows! after we had robbed them of everything, we can't blame them for simply taking a little from 'em to keep themselves alive."

The Professor added, quietly:

"If I had known, I would have given them more. Ah! it'll be a long time before we outlive this stage of man's inhumanity to man!"

Cap Ledyard's last observation to himself, before sinking into a sleep which no pangs of conscience could disturb, was:

"Now we're ready to open up the ball. Look out fur me, Old Flip! How many thousand was it? We'll see about that!"

CHAPTER XV.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

WITH a long-drawn shriek, like some fiery demon in rage, the Southern Pacific train rushed into Fresno City. Its stoppage was but momentary, and the one passenger alighting was a lady.

"Sure, is it yerself?" cried a youth who had been waiting on the platform, making up to her briskly, doffing his hat and extending his hand. "Well, it's worth a little step to have the like of you for company back."

The lady started and stared—only for an instant, however. Then she seemed to take the contagion of the smile that greeted her, and returned it with a laugh:

"This is Mr. Gerald Fitzgerald," she said.

"Whoo! and how did ye know me?" cried Gerald.

"By the tip o' yer tongue, my boy!" she replied, falling readily in with his humor.

"Put it there! There's a pair of us!"

She put her snow-flake of a hand into his broad paw, saying:

"I will, with my heart in it."

"Oh, now!" cried Gerald, affecting to be overcome, "you make me feel that all life has been wasted, save as a preparation for this moment. But, look out!—when I get a good thing, I keep it."

"Then I shall know where to find it when I want it back again."

"Or another in the place of it!" with a wink.

"But do you often lose it when it's in your own keeping?"

"We'll talk about that at another time, if you please—"

"Oh! it'll please me to talk about it whenever you have the time and inclination," cried Gerald, taking the word out of her mouth.

"Meanwhile, how is your sister?—and your esteemed father?—though I have never had the honor of meeting him."

"Well, maybe you're not counting on a warm welcome. Why, the clock has kept its hands before its face to hide the smirk on it ever since the receipt of your telegram; and the chairs have danced—Nora dancing with them, to be sure. But there! she vows she'll smother you! What grudge she has against you, sure I don't know."

"Father? He likes what pleases Nora. But then it'll not take much of an effort, I'm thinking, to lean to you a little on yer own account. Anyways, if he fails, I'll make it up to you myself."

"You are very kind! But I asked after the health of your relatives."

"Health, is it? Well, ask after their ailments, and it'll take less time to tell you."

"I am glad of that, I am sure."

"You look as if you were helping to starve the doctors yourself. Amen, say I! But where is your Saratoga?—or maybe there's a car-load of them."

"That is the only Saratoga I shall trouble you with this time."

"This thing?" holding up the grip-sack he had taken from her hand. "Why, there's hardly room in that for a pair of shoes."

"For me? you wretch?"

"Oh, no! I was thinking of my own. Look at the size of that!"

And thrusting out his foot he displayed a

breadth of "understanding" that seemed to justify his statement.

"But it looks like a slim chance for a riding-habit," he added, still glancing at the grip-sack dubiously.

"It contains a riding-habit, and a great deal else besides," was the lady's assurance.

"Is that so? And you're fond of horses, now, of course you are?"

"I dote on them!"

"Whoo! and I have a jewel for ye! But there's no time to lose talking about. One, two! and we've stepped into the hotel parlor. Three, four! and you're out of one dress and into the other. Five, six! and we're in the saddle and away!"

"I like your style, Mr. Gerald," laughed the lady, as he hurried her to the entrance of the hotel.

When, a few minutes later, she reappeared, in her riding-habit, he took off his hat and returned the compliment.

"And I like *your* style, Miss Champney!" he said, his eyes attesting the sincerity of his words.

La Blanchette blushed with pleasure. Few are the actresses who need to be told their strong point in dress; and she knew that she was "distracting" in that tight-fitting habit and the velvet jockey-cap that sat so jauntily on her head.

"You sit the saddle as if you were born to it," added Gerald, when she had sprung, as light as a fairy, from his hand to the back of her horse.

She had known that too, this many a day.

The ride to the Riffle— But it would make too long a story to give it in detail, with all Master Gerald's nonsense thrown in.

Suffice it to say that the recent storm had left the road in excellent condition, so that La Blanchette was spared the dust that had left Silver Riffle Sid looking like a giant gnome.

But as they neared the Riffle a flurry of rain threatened to destroy their gratitude to the clerk of the weather.

"This way!" cried Gerald, reining his horse into a bridle-path. "A smart scamper will take us under cover before that cloud breaks."

It was like a man, and a headlong one like Gerald—so his sister said afterward—to do what he was doing. He had but one thought—the pity of getting that pretty riding-habit wet. And he took this fine lady, neck or naught, and without a moment's warning, to Old Flip's wretched habitation, there to confront a girl who loved him; and she with the instincts of a lady and the surroundings of a slattern.

La Blanchette stared with astonishment, not without a trace of disgust, at the shabby hovel as they drew up.

"Nan! Nan! are you there?" cried rattle-brained Gerald, with never a misgiving.

And the door opened, and Sarry Ann appeared on the threshold.

"Here's a veritable windfall for you!" laughed Gerald, swinging himself from the saddle.

But as he presented himself to La Blanchette, to assist her to dismount, she said, with an expression of countenance and inflection of voice that needed no interpretation for Sarry Ann, though they told nothing to heedless Gerald.

"Surely, you do not live here?"

"Oh, no!" laughed Gerald. "But this is a friend of mine, and Nora's inseparable. But we'll have more time for formalities when we're under cover. Here comes the water."

But instead of giving him her hand, La Blanchette looked up at Sarry Ann.

It was plain that she had taken the girl for a servant.

Sarry Ann flamed crimson, and her nostrils dilated. In that moment she could have pulled Gerald's hair till his eyes watered.

But he saw only the drenching rain which was within a hundred yards of them and coming like a race-horse.

"Now for it!" he cried.

And without further ceremony he caught the little actress out of her saddle and ran with her in his arms into the shanty, escaping with only a dash of water as they crossed the door-stone.

"I reckon we got not more than a bucketful between us," laughed Gerald, the water glistening on his good-humored face. "Nan, this is Miss Champney, of course; and if you can manage the rest between you, I'll look out for the beasts."

So saying, he ran back again out into the rain to get the horses under the lee of an overhanging rock near by.

It did not occur to him that he had left them much to "manage between them;" but from a woman's point of view he could not have made matters much worse if he had tried.

Of course they were mortal enemies. That goes without saying. La Blanchette despised the drunkard's daughter for her sordid surroundings; and Sarry Ann, from the bottom of her heart hated the woman—beautiful and well-dressed!—whom she had just seen in the arms of the man who by holding *her* for one instant there in the canyon had changed the whole current of her life.

Two men, in a like situation and with similar

emotions would have stared at each other, the one contemptuously, the other with fierce defiance.

These two, being women, were only painfully polite.

"I am afraid that I am putting you to too much trouble," said La Blanchette, with a patronizing smile that was like a poisoned dagger, as she gathered up the skirt of her riding-habit, as if to keep it from contact with the floor.

Now this was without excuse; for, while many a shanty in the Riffle had only an earthen floor, Sarry Ann had by her own efforts secured a board floor for her home, and kept it as neat as soap and sand would make it.

Again the girl's nostrils dilated; but, controlling her voice, she replied, with the air of a queen of fallen estate, as she placed her one chair—alas! it was only a pine affair of the rudest description, the handiwork of a poor fellow whose heart, "as big as a house," could not redeem the awkwardness of his hands:

"It is my only regret that I have not better to offer you, madame!"

La Blanchette accepted the seat with a charming grace; but she was recalling the familiarity with which Gerald had addressed this girl as Nan. She wondered whether he added "mavourneen" when no one was by.

If Sarry Ann's speech and manners had been in keeping with her surroundings La Blanchette would have thought nothing of it. But here was a girl with the air of a lady, and Gerald had said that she and his sister were inseparables.

Now there had been more than mere breath in it when La Blanchette had told Gerald that she liked his style. She did like him immensely, and she was not well pleased to find at the very outset a rival whom even she could not afford to disdain.

For the few minutes they were along together she kept stabbing Sarry Ann with the sweet condescension of a fine lady from the city diverting herself by quizzing a rustic.

From the moment that Gerald returned, looking, as he declared, like a drowned rat, she paid no further attention to her hostess, but chatted with him as if Sarry Ann were a person of another class, to whom they were indebted for a temporary protection from the weather, but with whom socially they could have nothing in common.

It was she that took his dripping hat and held it gingerly between her finger and thumb, laughingly at a loss what to do with it after she had got it, until she decided to hang it over the fireplace. And she chided him for making such a muss in "this kind lady's"—and there she made a little break in her speech before adding "room," as if puzzled whether to call it kitchen, parlor or hall.

What was the use in his appealing to "Nan" in the old familiar way? The girl's heart was in her throat; and with the fine lady suddenly checking her smile and waiting for her to reply, while not looking at her, to resume her sprightly and exclusive chaff with Gerald the instant she had spoken, she could only answer him in monosyllables.

At last even he began to perceive dimly that she was not holding her own with this vivacious stranger. And as it was impossible for honest Gerald to hide anything, he looked troubled and puzzled; and that made matters worse, until Sarry Ann could scarcely restrain herself between the impulse to lose her temper, and an impending burst of tears.

To crown all, in the midst of her trial there came from without a devil-may-care:

"Whoo-oop!"

La Blanchette started.

"What's that?" she exclaimed.

Gerald did not answer her. His eyes had sought Sarry Ann. He saw her turn as pale as death.

"If them horses!" he exclaimed.

And leaving the sentence, which was only a pretext, uncompleted, he seized his hat and dove through the door, banging it quickly behind him.

CHAPTER XVI.

SARRY ANN'S HUMILIATION.

Now, La Blanchette was "as keen as a brier," as the saying is. One glance at Sarry Ann was enough to explain the whole situation to her.

As readily she divined Gerald's generous impulse to save the sorely tired girl from a new humiliation. But it was too late. She determined not to spare her victim one throb of pain.

"Oh! it is some drunken creature!" she exclaimed, with a display of disgust and affected timidity. "I wonder that you are not afraid to live in such an out-of-the-place among these wretched men."

And following Gerald to the door, she threw it open, and looked out.

The rain had ceased.

At a little distance Old Flip came rolling. As he lurched backward and forward and from side to side, his legs getting so tangled up that it was a wonder how he kept upright, he swung his disreputable old hat about, fairly howling in the mad joy of a "noisy drunk."

He had been piloted thus far by one who had often interested himself in Old Flip's behalf, "steering him clear of the bridge," a good-hearted fellow who went by the descriptive "handle" of Tow-head Ted, because of his frowzy mop of flaxen hair.

He it was who had presented Sarry Ann with the pine chair but now referred to, and in numberless other ways had betrayed his "sneakin' notion fur her."

With a delicacy that would hardly be expected in one of so rude exterior, he was in the habit of getting the old bumper on the homeward side of the creek, and then hiding until he saw him safely in the house, to spare Sarry Ann the humiliation of seeing her father in such a state in the presence of another.

To-day he had seen Old Flip "celebrating," and had induced him to go home before he was too besotted to move.

He was now in hiding, in a rage at himself at seeing the shame he had brought upon the girl he sought to serve.

Meanwhile Gerald was hurrying to meet Old Flip, to get him out of the way before La Blanchette saw him.

"Hillo!" cried Old Flip, seizing his hand as he came up, and making a feeble attempt to execute a sort of war-dance. "Hooray fur hooray! Who's got the rocks, ole boy? Down with the Shinees! We'll teach 'em a game they do *not* un'erstand!"

Then, as he lurched forward and threw his arms about Gerald's neck, sinking almost helplessly into his arms, he wailed out:

"Oh! I've been *swimmin'* in w'isky!"

"Come along here, old man," said Gerald, seeking to drag him out of the path. "I've got a little business to talk over with you."

But Old Flip resisted.

"Business?" he repeated, suddenly straightening up with drunken dignity. "I'm a business man, I am! I'm a negotiatin' of minin'-claims—that's what's the matter with yer uncle. That's the shanty, sir! Walk in! Walk in! Ef ye're talkin' business, I'll talk business with ye. But ef ye *ain't* a-talkin' business, ye hain't no business to come foolin' round hyar in business hours. So go about yer business, an' leave me time to attend to my business. Fur business is business; an' every man knows his own business best! Whoo! Gol-whang yer ole pictur'! ef ye'r' in fur a wrasslin'-match, I'll wrassle ye fur rocks, I will! Wake snakes, an' come fur me! Whoo-oo-oo! Give me room accordin' to the size o' my feet! Whoop! whoop! whoop! I'm a ragin' ruction, an' I weigh a ton!"

During his nonsense declamation about business, he lost the thread of seriousness; and at first resisting with drunken obstinacy Gerald's efforts to draw him away, he soon conceived of the matter as only fun.

Drunk or sober, Old Flip was "a handy man at a tussle"; and Gerald found himself with his hands full only to keep on his feet.

Seeing the futility of his attempt to prevent the meeting, he extricated himself free from his ridiculous position as soon as possible, and said, in a low tone:

"See here, Flip; be a man. Don't bring shame on your daughter. Don't you see that there's company in the house?"

"Company?" repeated Old Flip, abruptly resuming his dignity. "Why didn't ye say so before? A lady, too"—as he caught sight of La Blanchette in the doorway. "Waal, sir, I 'low to hev been in ladies' society before, in my day. I ain't in jest the shape to do the honors, an' that's a fact. But, sir, a gentleman's a gentleman, take him when ye will! It's manners as makes the man!"

He cocked his hat in military style, and set it jauntily on his head; and as that was about the only change he could make in his appearance by way of a toilet, he then essayed to walk a "chalk-line" to his domicile.

It was the crookedest chalk-line in the county; but he got there at last, after a fashion.

Meanwhile La Blanchette, standing within the house and therefore somewhat in shadow, had had an opportunity to see the old bumper in a strong light before he distinguished her clearly; and as she made out his features she turned suddenly quite pale.

In anticipation of dust, she had fastened a thick veil to her jockey cap. Now, with a quick motion she dropped this over her face.

Not having seen her loss of color, nor the expression of her eyes, Sarry Ann interpreted this as an added mark of disgust.

It hardened her with fierce defiance. She would drain her cup of humiliation to the dregs; but her enemy should not see her quail.

Standing proudly erect, and speaking in a clear, ringing tone, she said, as Old Flip crossed the threshold:

"This is my father!"

"It does me proud, ma'am, to know ye!" declared Old Flip.

And doffing his chapeau with a grand wave, he brought it back so as to cover his heart, and extended his other hand with his most fascinating smile.

"Excuse me!" murmured La Blanchette.

And shrinking from his proffered hand as if it

were a reptile, she hastily walked round him, to where Gerald stood staring helplessly in the doorway.

Retaining his attitude of gallantry, Old Flip turned, as she passed round him, so as to follow her with his conciliatory smile, and so stood, wagging his head gently from side to side.

"Take me away from here, rain or no rain!" she said, with passionate intensity, to Gerald.

He had no desire to prolong the painful scene. He dared not look at Sarry Ann. He stood aside to let her pass him, and then followed, closing the door, and without leave-taking.

Alone with her father, Sarry Ann stood white and still, with her lips tightly compressed and her eyes hard and glittering.

Having stared at the door for some time after it was closed, Old Flip finally turned round and regarded her with the stupid smile that had not left his face.

She looked at him without the softening of a line in her face.

"Honor thy father and thy mother!" passed through her mind, as if it were traced there with a red-hot iron.

As the disreputable old bumper stood there before her, balancing and bobbing his head in the silliness of intoxication, with his clothes a medley of rags that it was impossible for her to keep in order, he was an object such as no one could honor, no matter what his claim upon them. He outraged her every sense of self-respect.

"Mighty scrumptious woman!" he observed. "Slings a power o' style, I tell *you*! 'Low she didn't cotton to the ole man—none to speak of!"

And he chuckled over the disgust he had inspired.

"Will you lie down?" asked Sarry Ann, going to the bunk which he occupied at night—often in the day as well!—and throwing back the blanket.

His eyes rolled around sleepily.

"Don't keer ef I do—a spell," he said finally. And reeling forward, he would have pitched into the bunk head-foremost, but that she steadied him.

The moment he was on his back, he was snoring lustily.

The girl stood and looked at him, until her throat swelled, and the passionate tears blinded her, while she drew her breath hard through set teeth.

Then, suddenly turning, she fled from the house and away among the crags, like some wounded beast seeking solitude in which to die.

At last, far away from the sight of any of her kind, as she supposed, she threw herself upon the ground, and lay panting in a paroxysm of emotion that seemed as if it would dethrone her reason.

But one had not lost sight of her. One heart ached with a pain perhaps even deeper than hers, because it was not relieved by her fierce passion.

Tow-head Ted blamed himself for all that had happened. And he would willingly have given himself up to the tortures of the Inquisition, to allay her sufferings.

He followed her, with a dim feeling that perhaps it would be some consolation to her to know that she was not deserted by all the world.

"Let them shake her as may; let the ole man cut up as rusty as it was in his darned ole skin to do; but ye'll find Ted *thar*, every time!"

And between his sympathy with the girl's forlorn state, and the welling up of generous impulse in his heart, the great hobbledoy could scarcely restrain his tears.

It was not an easy thing to break in upon the girl's suffering, even with his offering of sympathy. He had always stood greatly in awe of her. She had seemed to him like some superior being. She was so slight, almost fragile, in build, yet of such perfect symmetry—so different from the bouncing lasses with whom he had played "Hyer I stand languishin'!" Her skin, though brown with exposure to the sun, was so pure, so dainty, so fine.

And now the majesty of her suffering seemed to place her even further from him and the rude offering of his loyalty. What was it, after all, that she should care?

But his heart yearned toward her, and almost unconsciously he edged toward her, until at last, having got within a few paces without startling her, he spoke:

"I say, Sarry Ann! don't—don't—take on—"

But the words died on his lips.

The girl leaped to her feet, and stood staring at him with a fierceness that quite took his breath away.

His face and neck had been crimson with a hot flush of confusion. Now they turned purple, mottled with spots of white; and the sweat oozed in beads about his mouth.

He stood before her with downcast eyes, his hat off, and his free hand gathering the skirts of his coat in bunches, while his knees trembled as if they would give way under him—this great fellow who would have faced a grizzly!

But that coat! He had bought it of a Jew, especially to make himself acceptable in Sarry Ann's eyes. It fitted him "like the paper on the

wall." Anyway, it was black—broadcloth, he had been assured, by every pledge known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and it had skirts, and was in every way the finest garment he had ever adorned his person with.

"What are you doing here?" cried the girl, hotly.

"Waal—now—ye see," he stammered, "I thought—ashow—ef so be—ye'd kinder—kinder—I—ah—wanted—ter say—"

"Well, now you've said it," she cried, breaking in upon his disjointed speech, "you'd better clear out! Do you hear?"

And she stamped her foot in fierce rage.

He felt as if she had set it upon his heart.

He glanced up at her with reproachful wonder. He would not have believed that such a spirit as she was now displaying was possible with her.

His eyes fell again instantly, and his head drooped more.

"I 'low it's your say-so, Sarry Ann," he said, with sad submissiveness. "I'll git. I won't trouble ye none."

And he shuffled his feet, about to obey, yet loth to leave her so.

"You brought him there!" she cried, as if, in spite of herself, she could not let him go without venting her displeasure.

"Yes, Sarry Ann," he admitted, humbly, "I done it!—I done it! But, Lord love ye!" with a sudden outburst, "I didn't go fur to put on ye!—*you* know that!"

He appealed to her piteously; but she was implacable, as only an angry woman can be.

"You did it all the same. And I hate you—"

"Oh, no! no! no!" he cried, lifting his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Yes, I do!" she insisted. "And I'll thank you to let me alone in future, and not meddle with what don't concern you. I won't have you sneaking around after me everywhere I go. You don't give me a minute's peace of my life! Now, you go away; and I hope I may never see your face again!"

She was getting hysterical with the excess of her emotions; and sobs and a spasmodic catching of the breath broke the flow of her speech.

Tears too now ran down her cheeks unrestrained. She had lost all control over herself. The barrier of pride was down. Helplessly she let him see, without disguise, how her heart was wrung.

How could he leave her so, to fight her battle out here in the wilderness alone?—when he would have laid his body under her feet, if she would but deign to step on it, and it would distill one drop of comfort into her cup of bitterness!

"Sarry Ann!" he suddenly cried, extending his hands and taking a step toward her.

"Go 'way! go 'way! go 'way!" she cried. "Oh, you won't go away!"

And, dropping her face into her hands, she fell to crying bitterly aloud.

"Don't! don't! fur the Lord's sake, don't!" he pleaded. "I'm a-hurtin' of ye all the time that I'd give my soul fur to do ye a leetle mite o' good!"

And he fled from the spot.

The accomplishment of her will in this brought no satisfaction to Sarry Ann. On the contrary, with the inconsistency of human nature, she felt as if now the last blow had fallen, and the whole world was against her; and casting herself again on the ground, she wept more bitterly than ever.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SCHEMING WOMAN.

HAD Gerald been a shrewdly observant man, he would have found reason to suspect that there was more in La Blanchette's agitation than annoyance at meeting a drunkard. She insisted on going directly to the horses, instead of waiting for them to be brought to her, brushing heedlessly against the wet bushes until her skirt was drenched; and when she put her foot in his palm to leap from it to her seat, he felt that she was trembling violently.

But once in the saddle, her wonted vivacity returned, though she did not lift her veil immediately and let him see her blanched cheeks and white lips.

Then, with a dexterity and quickness that left nothing further from Gerald's thoughts than that she had betrayed more than a humorous interest in Old Flip, she pumped him dry, that she might know all that was to be learned without exposing herself to the sharper wits of his sister.

With the same address, she turned the conversation to things about which Gerald was especially enthusiastic, until, when they rode up to his home, she had driven the blank look from his face and thoroughly loosened his tongue again, and she was riding with her veil up—he had already forgotten that it had been down—and her cheeks aglow and her eyes sparkling.

Her reception by Nora was—well, gushing, after the manner of young ladies, and need not be detailed.

The Professor welcomed her with the warmth of one who opened his heart to every one who came under his roof-tree; and she at once set herself to charm him as she had charmed both his children, an easy task with the warm-hearted, unsuspicious old gentleman.

The moment he passed from under the spell of La Blanchette's fascinations, Gerald relapsed to his uneasiness on Sarry Ann's account.

Whenever he had "put his foot into it," as he often did, it was his wont to look to his sister to right matters; and now he knew no rest until he found opportunity to unbosom himself to her.

She consoled him with:

"You stupid! Was there ever the like of you in the word?"

"You may abuse me," he replied; "but what's to be done about Nan? They were at daggers drawn from the first minute, I believe!"

"Of course they were; and no wonder!" exclaimed Nora, with a subtle feminine logic that took poor Gerald all aback.

Why should two persons of whom Nora was equally fond, and whom he admired so much, be at deadly feud on sight?

But leaving him no time for speculation, Nora went on:

"Now you have spoiled everything! It will be impossible ever to bring them together after such a scene. And I had counted on such a good time!"

"Why can't they shake hands, and make it up?" asked Gerald.

His sister regarded him with supreme disdain.

"Make it up, indeed!" she exclaimed. "Make what up?"

"Well, that's what I'd like to know!" cried Gerald. "What is it all about, anyway? You're a queer lot all round. I don't believe any of you ever know what you're fussing about, though you're all the time at it!"

"You're unusually complimentary to-day!" observed Miss Nora, and ran away, leaving him to solve the riddle as he best could.

But the want of tact had given her as hard a nut to crack. How, on the one hand, could she, in her intercourse with La Blanchette, avoid reference to Nan, when Nan formed so large a part of her life? How, on the other, could she alter her habit of having Nan at the cottage, and leave her to feel that she was slighted for the city friend?

La Blanchette helped her over one awkward feature of the case, by herself broaching the subject.

"My dear," she said, in conclusion, with her arms about Nora, and smiling compassionately into the girl's excited face, "I am sorry to see my little friend reduced to the necessity of seeking such companionship, though, of course, it is terribly lonesome not to have a single woman of your own class to speak to."

Whereupon Nora burst into a glowing vindication of her friend, urging La Blanchette to meet Nan under more favorable circumstances, and judge her personally, after making her acquaintance.

"Oh, to be sure!" assented La Blanchette, with a lift of the brows and a shrug of her plump shoulders, "as your friend, if you are in the habit of having her here, and you wish it."

Of course that was a woman's way of snatching the victory while yielding the field; and after that it was less likely than ever that Nora would attempt to bring them together.

That night, in the seclusion of her room, La Blanchette slipped from her bed and sat at her window in the moonlight, to plan the campaign that opened before her.

"Now, that I have got rid of one meddling woman," she reflected, "the next step will be to escape the hospitality of Miss Nora and her father, who are likely to be too kind for my purpose. Then, this Gerald. I can't have him at my heels, for a little while yet, anyway. Lastly, to find my truant lover, and this girl who threatens to destroy my prospects at one swoop. I wonder if he is capable of trying to trap the heiress and then laugh in all our faces."

She remembered with a certain cat-like complacency that Silver Riffle Sid was very much in love with her. That he had betrayed her in a fit of jealousy, she did not account an unpardonable fault. She rather liked to have a man do desperate things on her account, even if she had to suffer in consequence.

"And this Old Flip! I thought him dead. All these years I have believed myself free; and he might have arisen at any moment! What is to be done with him? I shall never have a sound night's sleep while he is above ground."

She shuddered at the thought that immediately followed these words.

"No! no! not that!" she said to herself, half-aloud. "I may be able to buy him off."

"But I wonder where he got this girl. Who is she? Not his daughter, certainly. But what is he doing with her? Does she believe that she is his child?"

"And yet, why not?" she asked herself, as another thought arose. "What do I know about his children? In this wild life, anything is possible."

"But suppose he cares for her? Suppose his ambition is roused for her? He may become a troublesome customer to handle! If she is as shrewd as she is spirited, she may play his cards for him. I'll dispose of her, anyway, if I find her in my way! If I am not certain that she belongs to him—and I shall be at no pains to

assure myself, that's flat—I shall have no scruples in her case.

"But I am getting into deep water. I will begin by doing first that which lies nearest at hand."

And reaching this sensible conclusion, she crept into bed, and slept soundly.

On the morrow she arranged at the outset for her freedom.

"My dear, prepare to open your eyes with astonishment, and then to be sweetly indulgent to what will strike you as a little 'cranky.' Year out and year in I see nothing but people! people! from morning till night, until it has come to seem as if I should go out of my mind, if I did not get away somewhere, for a week or ten days, where I should not see a living soul! So I have come to you, not for a good time as you would plan it for me, but for the privilege of spending whole days in absolute solitude with nature."

"Now, I'm sure you will think this terribly ungracious, when you are just brimming over with hospitality—I know that. But then, I shall be with you in the evenings; and how do we know how soon—shall get bored to death with myself, and be only too glad to run to you for companionship?"

Nora's expressive face showed her disappointment.

"I am sorry not to have you every minute of the time you can spare to us," she said, as if she were the recipient of the favor; "but, of course, we open our house to our friends, wishing them to get the most possible enjoyment out of their visit, in their own way."

"But you mustn't rob me altogether!" she added, with arch laughter.

The Professor may have thought her a rather eccentric young lady; but he only smiled in his kindly way, and told her that she must look out that she did not get lost.

She assured him that her sense of locality was like an Indian's; and for the rest, she felt abundantly able to take care of herself.

After breakfast, she walked as far as the shaft-house of the Lucky Venture, at Gerald's side, with her bridle-rein over her arm.

In those few minutes she drew from him a detailed description of all the country within a radius of five miles, and surprised him by the deftness with which, by a few strokes of a pencil, she made a remarkably accurate map of the various points and routes, from the directions and distances which he gave her.

"There goes the shrewdest woman I ever saw!" he reflected, as he watched her ride away.

The news of the arrival in their midst of a lady of unequalled beauty had spread like wildfire on the night before, and it was surprising how many "strapping" fellows took it into their heads, on the morning which we have now reached in the course of our narrative, to saunter in the direction of the Lucky Venture, to "see how things is comin' on."

An hour later the camp was in a blaze of excitement over the unprecedented event.

Every lucky fellow who had seen her had his story to tell to a circle of rapt listeners, as their gaping mouths attested.

Throughout the morning this continued to be an inexhaustible theme, until, finally, Pancake Pete asked one of these eulogists:

"I say, pard, what for style o' critter is this hyar, anyway?"

"Style?" repeated the miner. "Waal, boss, ef I had the gift o' gab to give ye ary idee of her style, I'd be runnin' fur Congress, I would, an' gittin' my whisky reg'lar, 'stid o' wrastlin' this hyar ole pick and pan fur a livin'!"

"But, blame it all! is she long, or short? fat, or lean? black, or white? red-headed, or—?"

"Turn the water out o' your sluice, boss!" interrupted the other, gripping Pancake Pete's arm. "I allow you'll have a chaine fur to clean all that up on yer own account; fur hyar she comes, as big as life!"

The crowd turned and looked eagerly in the direction indicated by the eyes of the speaker.

At the end of the street appeared an equestrienne, whose sweeping robes brought out in the more marked contrast the close, trim fit about the body.

She was riding at an easy canter, every movement of her body in graceful conformity with the cradling rise and fall of her horse.

In the daintily-gauntleted hand that hung at her side was carried an ivory-handled riding whip. It was the hand of a duchess—so thought the boys. But alas! her face! The veil that had hidden it from Old Flip's gaze now disappointed the crowd of loungers that lined the street; and it was wound about her neck, so that there was no chance for the wind or the motion of her horse to cause it to lift for even an instant.

But there was one who needed no such revelation. Silver Riffle Sid had admired that figure too often not to recognize it at a glance.

"I guessed it!" he said to himself. "She has dropped to me, as sure as the world."

"Anyway, I'll soon put the matter to the test. If she spots me as easily as I have her, I might as well play an open hand."

He moved apart from the crowd toward the approaching rider, affecting the slouching gait

of his assumed character of Pancake Pete, and staring at her point-blank, as did the rest.

It was a clever piece of acting; but it did not deceive a pair of the sharpest eyes on the Pacific Slope, familiar with every device of "make-up."

"As if I shouldn't know him!" she said to herself. "But he plays his part boldly. I like that. Heigho! what an inconstant thing I am! I wonder which. One, at least, is honest; and the other—a sorry knave, I'm afraid! But maybe he'd suit me best, after all. What a pity one can't eat one's cake and keep it, in this uncomfortable world!"

By this time she had arrived opposite Sid; and making a motion as if about to quicken her pace in running the gantlet of the staring crowd, she, with the most natural motion, dropped her whip.

Again one spectator was not deceived.

"That settles it!" said Sid to himself. "I'm gone!"

Nevertheless he sprang forward, Pancake Pete to the last.

He restored the whip with a bow, hat in hand, and a—

"Yer sarvant, ma'am!"

"Bald Bank, at two!" was her reply, in tones so low that the nearest, save Pancake Pete, only caught the music of her voice, without the significance of her words.

A cut on her horse's flank followed instantly, and she went down the street like a meteor.

Pancake Pete stood where she had left him, hat in hand still, staring after her with his mouth open, and a broad grin of satisfaction on his face.

"Pard," said a voice at his elbow, "you hev dead loads o' luck fall to ye, an' that's a fact! I 'lows you'd orter treat on that."

He turned, to encounter the fawning grin of Old Flip.

"Chuck! come along an' irrigate!" said Pancake Pete.

And linking his arm through that of the disreputable old bummer, he turned toward the nearest fount of "lubricating oil," waving his hand to as many of the crowd as chose to bear him company.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"PLAYING OFF."

BALD BANK was one of the points marked down on La Blanchette's map.

The object of her morning's ride was to visit several of these, with a view to selecting a spot favorable for a rendezvous.

It was a mark of her systematic way, to find her resort first, and then to look up her man, ready to give him his cue on sight.

She knew that Sid was familiar enough with the region thereabout to be acquainted with its local names, and that he had the quickness of wit to understand her hint.

Confident that he would keep the appointment, though he had given her no sign of comprehension or acquiescence, she rode to the spot, and proceeded to amuse herself until he should make his appearance.

"You were kind enough to keep my appointment," she observed, when he presented himself.

"The which, marm?" asked Pancake Pete, turning one ear toward her, as if he did not catch her meaning.

"You were good enough to come here at my request," repeated La Blanchette, looking at him quite composedly.

"Waal, now, marm," said Pete, rubbing his hands and bowing, after the manner of a man whose gallantry will not permit it to be assumed that the favor is otherwise than from the lady to himself, "it does me proud fur to hev you be so condescendin' as to give me the chaine fur to see you, marm, an' to speak to ye, in this hyar private and confidential style, so to say. I hope you'll b'lieve as I'm yours to command, fur ninety days, ur on good behavior—my own good behavior, marm!"

"I may be assured of your good behavior?" asked La Blanchette, quite simply.

"Waal, marm, ef I do say it, as shouldn't," replied Pete, modestly, "ef you was to go whar I hazz out when I'm to home, an' was to ask who to tie to when you wanted to find him thar every time, thar's a few, marm, I do b'lieve, as 'ud say: 'Take a double half-bitch on ole Pancake Pete. He stays, he does!'"

"Then you never yield to temptation?"

"The which is it, marm?"

Without replying, the actress walked over to a fallen tree and sat down on its trunk.

"We can talk more at our ease, if you will be pleased to take a seat here beside me," she said.

"What! thar, marm?" cried Pancake Pete, as if he found it difficult to credit his senses.

"Here," replied La Blanchette.

"Down thar, by you?" pointing at the place.

"Exactly. Do you need a more pressing invitation?"

"Waal, n-n-no, marm! ef so be—"

And he sat down gingerly, at a respectful distance.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of getting too near me, provided it is agreeable to yourself."

"But, marm, fur the Lord's sake! you *don't* mean—"

"Anything but what I say."

"Chock up to you, marm?"

"Chock up, as you say."

"Oh, waal, marm, I kin stan' it, ef so be ye don't change yer mind an' shoot the top o' my head off!"

And Pancake Pete awkwardly shuffled along the tree-trunk, until he was as "chock up" to her as could be desired.

He seemed to take great delight in this novel situation, though restrained from further advance by doubt as to the real purpose of the woman who had led him to this point of familiarity.

He looked at her sheepishly askance, and then threw his head back and stretched his mouth to its greatest extent, in a silent chuckle.

"Your modesty," she said, looking him steadily in the face, "strikes me as quite phenomenal, to say the least of it."

"I reckon it's my raisin'," remarked Pancake Pete, reflectively. "I come of poor but honest parents; an' my ma fetched me up to fight shy o' the gals!"

"It is some time since you came from under your mother's instruction, is it not?"

"It might be ten year, ur mebbe more."

"It is rather remarkable that, after so long an interval, you should continue so shy."

Pancake Pete laughed and fidgeted, and finally ventured to put his arm about her, with an odd sort of uncertainty of pressure, now inclining to draw her to him in a close embrace, and now relaxing his hold, as if fearful that she might suddenly requite his freedom with a sharp box on the ear, or in some manner not to be forecast, but in keeping with her unusual character of a pistol-shot.

"Not to be presumin', marm," he said, apologetically, "but—ahem!—I hope you *will* believe, *only* to oblige ye!"

"Don't you think," she asked, suddenly changing her voice, "that this farce has gone about far enough?"

"Yes, *petite*," he answered, in his natural voice.

And taking her chin in his hand, he pressed his lips repeatedly to hers.

As warm and pulpy as ever, they were now, for the first time in his experience of them, unresponsive.

Naturally finding this rather soulless amusement, he put her away from him, feeling that there was something new in their relations.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BLACK BARGAIN.

"WELL?" asked the disappointed lover.

"What have you to say for yourself?" returned his sweetheart.

He could not read the significance of this dead calm. He feared that a cyclone of passion might lie beneath it.

"What do you wish me to say?"

"I should think that a word in explanation of your presence here, and of your unusual appearance, might be in order."

"But why are *you* here?"

"Obviously to look after my own interests."

"Expecting to find me?"

"You seem to be under the impression that you have 'called' me. On the contrary, it is I that have 'called' you."

Silver Riffle Sid saw that there was no use in trying to "draw her out." The question was, how much did she know of his reason for being at the Riffle?

To "show up" more than the game called for, was quite foreign to Silver Riffle Sid's method of play. However, it would not do to spoil everything by a clear want of frankness.

"Well," he said, "it has come to my knowledge that there is some doubt as to the death of Walter Caswell's daughter; and that doubt brought me here, in your interests, as I trust you will need no assurance."

La Blanchette received this confirmation of her fears without the quivering of an eyelid.

"So much is no news to her!" reflected Sid.

"This is a rather startling discovery," observed La Blanchette, calmly. "Why did you not come to me with it at once, instead of starting off here by yourself?"

"And disturb you with what, after all, might prove a false alarm?" asked Sid, with a naturalness that did credit to his ability as an actor.

"Then you did not know that it was true when you left the city?"

"I had every reason to believe that it might be true," admitted Sid, who was too shrewd to put his foot into this trap, when it might prove that this self-possessed little lady was only playing him to test him.

"Still, you sought confirmation?"

Sid dodged her there, and replied, in a lowered tone, with a significant deliberateness:

"If the worst came, and it could be obviated *without your knowledge*, you might be spared some unpleasant recollections in the enjoyment of the fruits of your long litigation."

La Blanchette received this hint with only a momentary suspension of the breath and a slow ebbing of the color from her cheeks, followed by a determined setting of the lips.

"*She'll* not stand in the way of anything!" reflected Sid.

"Does Colonel Wallingford know of this?"

"I am afraid that he does."

"Then you may expect sharp competition with him."

"Doubtless."

"How did you purpose to meet it?"

"By being first on the field."

"And concluding your operations before he reached here?"

"Yes."

"Has he learned of this recently?"

"He must have done so; else he would have moved before."

"If he had remained ignorant, there could be no doubt of your being able to put this resort permanently beyond his reach?"

"She is spreading the snare all about me!" reflected Silver Riffle Sid. "She certainly knows, however she gained the information. And she must know it all. I had better be prepared to make a clean breast of it, and with grace."

Aloud he said:

"By not being too nice about the measures adopted."

"The same which are your only recourse, as matters stand?"

"Yes."

"Now, how do you suppose that he got his information?"

"There are so many ways. The wonder rather is, that he should so long have remained in ignorance. But the fact is what we have to deal with. Now that you are here, you may as well know that desperate situations require desperate remedies. You will guess, without my saying so, that I came here intending to win! It is to be regretted that you came here so openly. You see the disguise that I thought it prudent to adopt. How did you come to penetrate it?"

He had talked clear away from the point of her question.

Without going to so much trouble, she coolly ignored his "leader."

"What have you done, so far?" she asked.

He could not well tell her that he had betrayed her secret a second time, and to what end. He judged her rightly in believing that she would be disposed to look with lenity upon a mad act done under the goad of jealousy. But there was something less heroic in sacrificing her for his own behoof, even when the stake was his life.

"I have located everything," he said, "and am ready to seize the first opportunity to act with promptness and effect."

"The girl is alive?"

"Yes."

"Resident here?"

"Yes."

"Does she know of her parentage?"

"She has never suspected it."

"But she cannot be alone. She is under the protection of some one?"

"A sort of informal, self-constituted guardian, I suppose you might call him."

"He knows the secret of her birth?"

"Perfectly."

"And could establish it before any court of justice?"

"Without doubt."

"Why has he neglected her interests so long?"

"He is such an old wreck that he is probably afraid to fight such a power as the proprietor of the Lucky Venture. Besides, were he to discover his identity in this camp—which he would have to do to establish the claim of his *protegee*—the chances are that he would be lynched before the sun went down. Before the courts his prospects would probably be little if any better."

"H'm! It would seem to be an easy matter to quiet such a man, but for Colonel Wallingford's unfortunate knowledge of him."

Silver Riffle Sid winced under this thrust.

"Without remedy in that respect," he said, "we must reach our end in spite of it."

"You have not told me yet how this girl and her companion are known to the world."

"He is an old bummer, whose handle, Old Flip, is suf—"

"Old Flip!"

The name burst from her lips involuntarily. She started as if stung, and turned as pale as death.

The next instant her eyes flashed with aroused pride, and her face hardened with iron determination.

She was not thinking of Old Flip. Oh, no! She saw the girl whom she had flouted with wanton superciliousness—not the helpless sufferer of yesterday, but, strong in the conscious power of wealth, repaying her in her own coin!

More than this, the Mountain Rose was a girl whom any man might well seek in marriage, even without the tempting bait of a fortune in dower. Had that been a part of Silver Riffle Sid's scheme, after all? And what assurance had she that he might not yet conclude to throw her over and marry the true heiress, before she knew her own value?—as the world generally estimates such things!

"It is time," said La Blanchette, suddenly

regaining her self-control, "for plain speaking. Why did you go to Colonel Wallingford with this story?"

Silver Riffle Sid had the rare merit of knowing when he was "down." He made no further effort to dodge the issue, but answered straight to the point.

"Because I thought that you had deceived me."

"And to deprive me of a fortune was your manly revenge!"

"That *would* have been cheap! I believed that you had a better opinion of me."

"What was it but that?"

"I intended to marry this girl, and let you see that I could still have the heiress. But I confess I bungled the matter. I acted on impulse, and did the nearest thing first, not stopping to think that I was lessening my chances of accomplishing the real triumph I was after."

The color leaped again into La Blanchette's cheeks, and she caught her breath with a little thrill of delight. Her eyes softened too. After all, it was this fiery, passionate, headlong, unreasoning love that she valued. Gold might garland it with beauty and surround it with an atmosphere of romance; but for mere wealth in itself, or even for the social consideration it would bring, she had a true Bohemian's disregard.

Silver Riffle Sid saw that he could easily make his peace with her for that sort of offense. And it was no vexatious task to play the part necessary. He had only to give the rein to his feelings; for he was very much in love with her.

Suddenly catching her in his arms again, and straining her to his breast, he cried:

"*Petite*, it was you that I wanted, with or without the money! I was making a fool of myself—I knew it all the while. But I wanted to hurt you somehow, as bad as you had hurt me; and I thought it would gall you to see her reigning where you had counted on being, and me with her, as if I had only been after you for the money. Why, if I had cared for that, I have had my chance at this girl any time this five years."

Now her eyes shone, as he held her head close down upon his breast, and pressed fond kisses upon her lips. And they had regained their own passionate life, and clung to his with responsive tenderness.

"And you have known her so long?" she asked.

"Ever since I was a boy and she a baby. I saw her go down in the Devil's Stirabout in Old Flip's—Whisky Skin, as he was then called—arms."

"But lately? You have lived here at the Riffle near her?"

"Off and on for five years."

"But why did it never occur to you to see her righted?"

"At *your* expense?"

"Before you knew me."

"What had I to do with it? It was none of my funeral. I was getting on well enough. Why should I bring a row about my ears when I wasn't any too popular as the thing stood?"

"It never occurred to you, I suppose, that the property, even with its incumbrance—"

But Sid stopped her. He knew well enough that it is not a difficult thing to persuade a woman of the inferiority of another's personal attractions to her own, at least in the estimation of the speaker. So he said, simply:

"She may be all right for some; but the fact that I dropped to you on sight, is enough to show that she isn't my style."

"Sid, if it was only the money, I'd say let it go. But, do you know? I had a little tilt with her yesterday, a foolish one, I grant you; but now I'd rather lose my life than that she should triumph over me."

"She sha'n't if you say so."

"Well, I do say so."

"By hook or by crook?"

"By hook or by crook."

"That settle it."

While this nefarious bargain was thus being struck, a man was staring with mouth agape at these to outward appearances oddly-assorted lovers from behind a neighboring foliage-screened crag.

By his stock of yellow hair we recognize Tow-head Ted.

He was near enough to overhear what was said.

CHAPTER XX.

THE GREAT MAN ON THE SCENE.

WHEN La Blanchette returned to the cottage, she was met by Nora, who ran to her with eyes round and breath fluttering, to announce the arrival of Colonel Wallingford, accompanied by Gower.

They were not to stay at the cottage, the colonel declining the Professor's pressing invitation, on the plea that it would be an imposition to turn his bannister of a house topsy-turvy with his bachelor ways—irregularity at meals, late hours, and the like.

Nora concluded:

"I held my breath when Gerald laughingly told him we were harboring his mortal foe. But he didn't seem to be annoyed, and that's a

fact. On the contrary, he said something so complimentary of you, that I'll not puff up your vanity by repeating it!"

"Don't! I am particularly susceptible to Colonel Wallingford's opinion."

"Well, I think him a very fine gentleman myself—so soft-spoken."

La Blanchette looked at the speaker, so quickly and keenly that the color in the girl's cheeks lightened.

"Have you met him before?" asked the actress, after a momentary pause.

"Oh, yes! Several times."

"But I thought you said he had never been here?"

"Would that prevent my seeing him in San Francisco? We used to live there, you know; and father knew him quite well. Then I visit there two or three times every year. Father insists on it, so that I sha'n't quite forget how they do in civilized society, he says."

"And Colonel Wallingford is always kind to you on such occasions?"

"Yes. Mrs. Harrison says that she is always glad when I go to them; for then she and the girls were sure of seats in his box at the opera."

Nora laughed at this jest of her city hostess; and La Blanchette did not pursue the subject further.

"Here's food for reflection!" she said to herself. "I wonder whether that devil-fish is lying in ambush for this dainty morsel. And here is her father, with his nose in a book, as blind as any mole; both he and addle-headed Gerald, no doubt, looking upon the colonel as a middle-aged man, belonging to another generation, and therefore not to be thought of in connection with their little girl. If she had a mother, now, there would be no such mistake. But, then, the mother would probably be angling for the colonel's money; so it would amount to about the same thing, after all."

Aloud she asked:

"Where are the gentlemen now?"

"Down in the mine with Gerald."

"Then I shall at least meet them, when they return above ground?"

"Why, yes. I suppose so. Do you want to?"

"Why not? What is to prevent them from taking tea with you, at least?"

"Nothing. A capital idea! Count it done!"

And in a new flurry of excitement Nora ran off, her immediate destination being the preserve pantry.

With the help of her maid-of-all-work she soon had everything in "apple-pie order,"—bread like cream within and nut-brown without, butter as yellow as cowslips, amber honey and jelly like wine-tinted glass, cake the beauty and fragrance of which made one's mouth water in advance, and tea "alla same likee you catchee Hong-kong side," to be served, presently, in china that looked almost as fragile as egg-shell—and the whole on a spread like a snow-bank!

Then she smoothed her apron, her hair, and her countenance, striving to look demure and staid as became the hostess of such distinguished guests.

Her father patted her cheek fondly, and called her the nattiest little housewife on the Pacific Slope; and her gratified smile and lightened color showed that she held that compensation enough for her greatest effort to do honor to him by gracing his table becomingly.

Word had been sent to Gerald to be sure to secure the gentlemen for tea.

Colonel Wallingford began to stammer out something about their appearance; but Gower would not hear to it.

"Come! come! my dear colonel," he interposed, in that brisk, jocular way of his which enabled him to do and say things that would have been intolerable from another man, "we may as well begin by meeting the enemy with a bold front. Imagine the amused elevation of Miss Champney's gracefully-arched brows, on learning that you had abandoned the field to her!"

So the proprietor of the Lucky Venture accepted with such grace as he could command, only stipulating for time to go to their hotel and make themselves presentable.

He coughed and drew closer up about the lower part of his face the muffler that he wore, declaring that, as like as not, this poking about under ground would be the death of him. Then, having swung into the saddle, he pulled down over his eyes his broad-brimmed slouch hat, as if to keep it from being blown off.

But Gower, who was watching him furtively, put another interpretation upon these two actions. It must be admitted that they served somewhat to screen his face from observation; and he frowned and glanced about uneasily, as he dashed into the Riffle and down its one street, and flung himself from the saddle and hurried into the hotel, like a man of distinction who prefers to escape the homage of the crowd.

The return to the cottage was effected in much the same way, so that few of the gaping crowd got anything like a satisfactory view of the great man.

When he had passed, Pancake Pete made himself conspicuous by urging that the camp owed it to itself as well as to the mining magnate, to

get up a "demonstration" in his honor, and call him out where all could see him.

The boys caught at the idea, and told him to "wade in," but he protested that it was the business of the marshal, as the representative man of the place.

Where was Cap Ledyard? Nobody knew.

The fact was that, on the appearance of the proprietor of the Lucky Venture, Cap had become inwardly greatly excited, though outwardly showing no sign.

"Hang me ef the thing *don't* look as if it was comin' to a head!" he ejaculated. "And I'll be the day after the fair, ef I don't look sharp. Now's the time, an' not another minute to spare. I'll drop on to the old rip to-night."

It was well on toward night when he returned; and he was seized upon at once.

By nine o'clock everything was in readiness, of which Brown was "chief."

The Fire Company was of the most primitive order. First came a platoon of ax-bearers. Following them were eight men with a long pole on their shoulders, to one end of which was attached a heavy iron hook, and to the other a long rope. Last came a long double line of men with fire-buckets.

As the Fire Department was the one public institution, all of the "solid" men of the place belonged to it; so that it presented quite a respectable appearance in point of numbers.

By way of uniform, without which all of the glory would have been wanting, the men wore red shirts and caps all of the same pattern.

Pine knots served for torches; and not only the firemen, but all others who chose, provided themselves.

The whole was headed by a fife and drum, and a flag of defense of which every man in the company would have fought to the death.

Pancake Pete carried no torch.

"Ole Flip an' me 'll jog along together," he said, linking his arm through that of the bumper; "an' I allow as the beacon what he carries in the middle of his face 'll do fur us both."

"Tie to yer uncle, ole man," he added, confidentially, to his companion, "an' I'll see that ye have a seat in the front row."

And Old Flip grinned, little dreaming why the stranger had "cottoned" to him so from the first, and what he was seeking to lead him into now.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE COLONEL HAS A CHILL.

BY Nora's reception of her guests, La Blanchette could form no opinion as to her feelings.

She herself gave Colonel Wallingford her hand, and received the gallantry in the lawyer's greeting, with the careless air of Bohemian comradeship which not uncommonly marks an actress. She was taken in to tea by Gower, and here Nora baffled her closest watchfulness, though to her keen perceptions it was plain that the proprietor of the Lucky Venture had set his fishy eyes covetously on that delicate flower just budding into womanhood.

After tea the actress, by a little tact, got possession of the three other gentlemen, so as to leave Nora and the colonel to their mutual entertainment.

In the course of the evening they passed through the open window out upon the veranda, to enjoy the beauties of the still, moonlit night.

The light from the room fell upon their backs; and La Blanchette sat where she could observe their movements without seeming to do so.

Again, the deference with which the colonel bent toward the girl at his side showed his desire to conciliate her favor; but, as before, Nora betrayed nothing to the eye.

From time to time La Blanchette made a momentary break in her chatter, in the hope of catching some significant inflection of the voice—that avenue where oftenest the guard sleeps on his post. But even there she was baffled.

"Either she is safe, or the minx takes to dissimulation as a duck takes to the water!" was the actress's final verdict.

But the colonel was only talking of the beauties of the scene, and listening to Nora's account of the haunts she most frequented in her rambles among the crags.

She loved her mountain home; and in the enthusiasm of her descriptions she talked to the colonel as free from restraint as if it had been any other man.

Suddenly he interrupted her with:

"What is that?"

And following the direction of his eyes, she saw a gleam of red and flickering light through the foliage, in the direction of the Riffle.

While she looked the light increased.

"Can it be a fire in the camp?" asked the colonel.

"Oh, no!" replied Nora. "You could not see it from here, for the intervening crags. And that is quite near—just where the path turns round Jackson's Nose. Why, I believe it is men with torches. And, listen!—that is a fife and drum."

As the procession rounded the point of rock which Nora had called Jackson's Nose, the music became quite distinct.

Nora leaped to the truth in an instant.

"Why!" she exclaimed, looking at the colonel with a bright, pleased smile.

Then she stopped abruptly, reflecting that it would be an awkward thing to make such an announcement and have the event turn out otherwise.

Instead, she called through the window:

"Father! Gerald! come here!"

Gerald shot through the window as if propelled by a catapult. He always moved promptly.

The Professor only turned his head with a quiet smile, and asked:

"What is it, my dear?"

But Nora was satisfied to thrust the responsibility upon her brother.

"What's that but torches, Gerald?" she asked. "And do you hear the fife? Nobody but Bulge-Eye Billy ever shrieked so persistently about the girl he left behind him."

She laughed gayly at her little play on the name of the turn which Bulge-eye Billy was noted for playing "early and often."

But, even before Gerald announced his opinion, the colonel gave a little shiver which ended in a cough, and said:

"I'm afraid I have been imprudent, standing here in the night air. Shall we return indoors?"

"Wait just one moment, my dear sir!" said Gerald. "If I am not very much mistaken, you are going to be in demand. Well! well! the boys have some public spirit about them, after all. It isn't every day we have a notable man in the place, Colonel Wallingford; and they are going to give you a little blow—excuse me!—ovation."

"Is this your idea, Gerald?" asked his sister, eagerly.

"My idea?" repeated Gerald, ruefully. "Did you ever know me to have a bright idea in my head?—or out of it, for the matter of that!"

Nora's face fell at her unlucky surmise, and she tried to cover her confusion by turning to the approaching lights.

"It is the Fire Department," she said, giving the little organization its most sounding name, with true Western exaggeration. "Don't you see their red shirts?"

"I hope you are mistaken," said the colonel, frowning. "Such attentions may be pleasing to some men, but I should find them only an annoyance. If you will excuse me, Miss Fitzgerald, I will go in."

And, bowing, he went in, whether or no.

Nora received the impression that he was a very modest man.

To the Professor he seemed a very proud man, who disdained the rough fellows who sought to do him honor.

Gerald was lost in astonishment. He could not understand how any one could be indifferent to public homage. For himself, there was no sweeter music than three ringing cheers, with a welkin-splitting "tigah" at the end.

La Blanchette and Gower alone judged shrewdly of the colonel's aversion to notoriety. They noticed that, while he had been restless and alert all along, he had now turned suddenly ghastly pale, with a feverish burning of the eye, and a shrinking into himself that was more like a moral than a physical chill.

The actress, who had no cue to his past life, save the odd fact that he had for so many years left this valuable property entirely without personal inspection, sought an explanation on the basis of those bitter feuds which so often spring up between the men who have drawn the prizes in the lottery of life and those who have drawn the blanks.

Was Colonel Wallingford haunted by the fear of some secret foe here in the mountains—some man who nursed the memory of a wrong in the far past? Many a fortune rests upon a cornerstone of fraud. Did Colonel Wallingford hug his gold with a miser's cowardice?

The lawyer read the signs another way. But he held his peace, with locked lips and contracted eyes.

"I got my system thoroughly impregnated with malaria years ago on the Isthmus," said the colonel; "and I never come to the mountains without developing some lurking seeds. That might seem odd to most people; but it works so in my case. I have been ailing for a week, and it was the extreme of folly to take just this time to come here. Then to make the descent into that wretched mine, all the gold in which wouldn't tempt me again!"

"Oh, Colonel Wallingford!" interrupted the actress, in her free way, "swear no rash oaths adverse to that delightful mine—I insist upon it, *delightful*! You know, at tea, you promised to take me through it, and I'm afraid to trust myself with any one but you. Ugh! how many feet of rock is it between one and the sunlight? But I shall hold you to your promise."

"We'll see how I come through with this," said the colonel, with a polite bow.

Then turning to Nora, he went on, with a rather sickly attempt at gallantry:

"But standing in the night-air has capped the climax, Miss Fitzgerald. 'If I am ill in consequence, I shall look to you for nursing, since you enticed me to it.'"

"It's sorry I'd be to cause you suffering," said Nora, the brogue coming "to the fore" under the influence of self-reproach. "But I never dreamed of harm to any one; and I thought you would be pleased to see the moon rise between the two peaks. Can I get you anything to take?"

"If a hot whisky wouldn't put me in the light of a very prosaic invalid," ventured the colonel, with a deprecating smile.

But the sentence ended in an internal quiver, as if the shrill shriek of the fife, which was now close at hand, penetrated to the very marrow of his bones.

"Whisky, is it?" cried the Professor, brightening with sudden interest. He was too much of an Irishman to hear of "the cr'athur" unmoved. "Well, now, if a drop of the best Irish whisky that ever drove a moonshiner of this country distracted with envy will be of service to ye, you'll not leave us till you have your skin full of it. Run, Nora aroon!"

She went; and as every ingredient of that soul-warming beverage was at hand—when was it every lacking "in an Irishman's shanty?" soon returned, bearing in her own fair hands a small tray, with a setting of glass and spoon, and decanter and sugar-bowl, and a cleftlemon, and a pitcher from which rose faintly-perceptible wreaths of steam.

But already the flare of the brilliant illumination without could be seen through the curtain; there was the tramping of many feet and the suppressed murmur of voices of an undisciplined crowd, above which rose the authoritative tones of Sam Brown, marshaling his fire-laddies into presentable line; and finally, when all was "in shape", a single shrill note of the fife, which proved to be the signal for the fife-and-drum overture.

Bulge-eye Billy struck into Yankee Doodle at a rate that would have jiggered the brogans off the nimblest heels that ever "whelted" the Ould Sod, and would have driven all Dixie crazy with delight, while Stumpy Stiles accompanied him with that particular kind of a rubby-dub-dub which is known as the "double drag."

Now this double drag of Stumpy's was the especial pride of the camp; and the adulation the boys showered upon him for his skill was enough to fill a wiser head than his with vain-glory. On all great occasions it was "trotted out" for the admiration and envy of all comers. Then would be recounted the legend that Stumpy had played it with marked acceptance before some great general, at some great battle, in "the Late Unpleasantness."

"An', stranger, when you perjure a galoot as kin touch *one side o'* that thar double drag, you kin rake a *pile o'* money out o' this hyar camp!"

So now Stumpy, with the serene gravity of modest greatness, yet with a poise of the head which showed that he knew his worth, stationed himself close up before the open window, so that those within could have the full benefit of his wonderful performance, and "laid himself out to do his level best;" and the way he brought those extra taps, like musket shots, out of the general roar of that demon drum, was never to be forgotten—*by the survivors!*

The boys gazed at him with something not far removed from reverence that night, craning their necks all along the line. What would not the best of them have given, to "stand in Stumpy's shoes, and make that thar machine talk!"

Within doors the scene was different—*slightly!*

Gerald stood in the middle of the floor in an attitude that would have served for a young gladiator awaiting the signal that was to call him into the arena. He liked the double drag, and thought it soul-stirring.

His sister, with a comical look of distress and amusement, stopped her ears with her fingers.

Gower, with his hands deep in his pockets, balanced from heels to toes, taking the matter philosophically. It was an incident of our great and glorious republic. If the people hadn't the right to deafen their men of distinction, the country might as well go to the dogs!

Crouching in his corner and sipping his hot whisky, Colonel Wallingford growled:

"Oh, this is infamous!"

La Blanchette was laughing heartily. There was no danger that her silvery voice would be heard above the shrieks of that fife gone mad with patriotic ecstasy, and the rattle and roar of that infernal drum.

The Professor sat in his chair with his wonted bland, benignant smile. The boys were like overgrown children to him; unruly at times, and not over-scrupulous in their dealings with the outer barbarian; but ready to do you a kindly hand's turn, if you took them in the humor.

CHAPTER XXII.

FACE TO FACE.

BUT all things earthly have an end, even a fife and drum serenade; so finally, with a shriek "way up in G," "Yankee Doodle" suddenly gave up the ghost, and the demon double drag

fled away among the crags, sending back fitful echoes until it died away in the distance.

Then Cap Ledyard's voice was heard, shouting:

"Three cheers fur Colonel Wallingford! Raise 'er, boys! raise 'er!"

And the boys did "raise 'er" until the windows fairly rattled.

"Well, colonel, what's to be done about it?" asked Gower, laughing. "This is one of the penalties of greatness. After such an ovation, there's no escape for you, that I can see."

"I can see one, if you can't!" growled Wallingford. "Go out there and tell them—Well, tell them anything you please; only send them packing."

"Oh, Colonel Wallingford!" cried the actress, "how ungracious!"

"I will not be dragged into discomfort by a lot of vagabonds that I know nothing about and care less—and all for a piece of fol-de-rol!"

Gerald stared in amazement. Less and less could he understand this insensibility to popular approval. He believed heartily in speechifying and bedeviling taut sheepskin.

"What is to be done must be done at once. They are waiting!" urged Gower.

"Go and do as I tell you," persisted Wallingford.

The lawyer was too wise to withstand a profitable client. He might win the argument and lose his fee!

"Ladies, you will not refuse to lend me your support?" he asked, bowing. "And you, Professor, as our host."

"Oh! we insist on our share in the honor!" laughed La Blanchette. "Come, Nora!"

Gerald sprang to the window and drew the curtain.

Although Nora, suddenly intimidated by the flare of the torches and the restless multitude of eager faces, would have had her father go before, La Blanchette urged her forward, so that they were first on the veranda.

"Three cheers fur the ladies!" yelled a stentorian voice, so close at hand that Nora involuntarily shrunk behind her companion.

Half-blinded and wholly bewildered, she could not locate the speaker. It seemed as if he belowered into her very ears.

But, even before passing through the case-ment La Blanchette had made out Pancake Pete, and also his companion, Old Flip.

They were at the edge of the veranda, directly before the window, the old bumper resting his chin on the railing and staring straight before him with a grin of expectant delight.

With a quick movement of her fan, as if to screen her eyes from the glare of the torches, she cut off his view of her face.

Notwithstanding her recent tender relations with Pancake Pete she did not now notice him at all, greatly to the wonder of Tow-head Ted.

"She ain't a-lettin' on!" he said to himself and tried harder than ever to solve the puzzle that had been addling his thick brain all the afternoon.

"What does sich a likely gal want o' sich an an'ornery old scalawag as Pancake Pete? That's what sticks in my gizzard!"

Although Cap glared wrathfully at the stranger who had had the presumption to infringe on his especial province, the boys waited for no official indorsement to honor the ladies.

The final yell in which all their enthusiastic gallantry was concentrated was even more harrowing to sensitive nerves than even the famous double drag; and though Nora kept her fingers out of her ears she could not restrain a distressed shrugging of her shoulders and knitting of her pretty brows.

Meanwhile the Professor had come out, followed by Gower and Gerald, who had let the curtain fall behind him, leaving the colonel to his hot whisky and—his conscience!

Gower stepped to the rail of the veranda, and began:

"Citizens of Silver Riffle:—Colonel Wallingford has requested me to say—"

"Louder! Louder!" yelled some one on the outskirts of the crowd, himself vociferous enough to be heard half a mile.

"Order! order!" came from various parts of the throng.

"You dry up!" roared one who was where he himself could hear.

"Simmer down!" was the recommendation of a second individual, in a like favorable situation.

Gower raised his voice.

"Citizens of Silver Riffle:—Colonel Wallingford requests me to thank you for the honor of this demonstration, and to beg that you will excuse him from a personal appearance to-night, in consideration of the sudden development of more alarming symptoms in an illness which has been hanging over him for several days. In behalf of the colonel, I would assure you that—"

But it appeared that the boys did not want assurances in lieu of the "straight white article."

With that want of reverence which has been born of our great and glorious institution of liberty, they did not scruple to interrupt the speaker with an unmistakable murmur of discontent.

"Wallingford! Wallingford!" they yelled.

"He kin show himself; an' that won't hurt nobody!"

"If you will allow me—"

"Wallingford! Wallingford! Wallingford!"

"Trot out the colonel!"

"Let us see him in the winder!"

"I would say that the cause—"

"Wallingford! Wallingford! Wallingford! Wallingford!"

"That won't go down with this crowd, ole man!"

"We've been thar!"

"Ye can't ring no cold deal into this hyar game, pard!"

"We'll give you a show after the colonel!"

"That's business! Wallingford! Wallingford! Wallingford!"

There was no withstanding them; and bowing and waving his hand, Gower smilingly abandoned the field, retreating into the house to see what could be done with his principal.

Such a yell of triumph as they sent up, combined with laughter!

Bulge-Eye Billy and Stumpy Stiles took the contagion; and the way Yankee Doodle and the double drag "cut loose" was appalling. Billy blew until he was purple in the face, and the eye to which he owed his "handle" seemed about to take final leave of its socket; while Stumpy belabored his drum with such a will that the veins stood out in his neck like whipcords.

"Was there ever anything like this outside of Bedlam and the Stock Exchange?" screamed La Blanchette into Nora's ear.

But suddenly bethinking herself of something of far greater importance, without waiting for an answer, if Nora had been equal to one, she turned and followed Gower into the house.

"No use, you see," she was in time to hear Gower say.

"But I won't be forced!" cried the colonel, with a brave effort at resolute indignation.

But his lips were too white and his voice too uncertain for strength.

"Oh, yes you will," replied Gower, with a good-natured laugh. "They'll pull the house down about our ears if you don't."

"But this is outrageous!"

"No doubt!"—with a shrug.

"But, my dear colonel," interposed La Blanchette, "why not humor the absurd fellows? I should think it just fun."

"It's no fun for me!"

La Blanchette thought that there was truth in that, if his look of utter desperation was any criterion. But she said:

"Come! come! We can bundle you up so that there will be no danger of you taking any more cold. And they are quite reasonable. They ask only that you show yourself at the window."

She went and brought his hat and the muffler he had worn about his neck, and with scarcely any further opposition on his part, she adjusted them in place.

"It is inevitable!" he muttered to himself.

"What a fool I am, ever to have come to this accursed place! Better have let the thing go to this jade. How tender she is of me! What is she doing here, I wonder?"

The actress went through the window first, and held the curtain aside after her. She was burning with curiosity to get a clew to the mystery of this strange reluctance, which she felt more and more strongly was not without significance. She wanted to see Colonel Wallingford's face when he appeared before that crowd.

Moreover, it had been borne in upon her that the presence of Pancake Pete and the bumper in the particular spot they occupied was not accidental. She determined to keep an eye on them, too.

Colonel Wallingford came before the window attempting to hold his head so that the brim of his hat would shade his face.

It was impossible, with such a blaze of light coming from every direction.

He would have stopped on the sill of the case-ment but that Gower, coming close after, almost forced him out.

Meanwhile, at sight of him, the boys had set up a yell of triumph. It was not a cheer, but an insane howl of delight. Not a few politicians have the wit to enhance their popularity with the mob by coquetting with them in this way, knowing that they never love a great man so well as when he seems to yield his own will to theirs.

To add to the hubbub, that fiendish fife and that demoniac drum went fairly frantic.

But one voice, clear and incisive, pierced the mad uproar like the crack of a rifle. It articulated but a single syllable:

"Matt!"

La Blanchette heard it, and recognized Pancake Pete's voice.

The Professor, Nora, Gerald, Gower—if any of these heard it they did not notice it, because it had no significance to them.

But Colonel Wallingford heard it, and to him it sounded like the crack of doom!

He did not recognize the voice, but he did perceive its direction and its vicinity.

He had been looking out over the crowd, but

as that ominous name smote his ear he dropped his eyes to the rail of the veranda just before him.

There he saw but one face. It was not Pancake Pete's; it was the face of Old Flip.

La Blanchette, it will be remembered, had her eye upon the mining magnate. She saw his eyes fall at the sound of that name; saw them become suddenly fixed and staring; saw him turn livid and rigid, and sway as if about to fall.

Another woman might have called out to Gower warningly, might even have sprung to the assistance of the stricken man.

La Blanchette looked for the cause of his disturbance.

She saw Pancake Pete with a look of grim satisfaction on his face. But she saw something besides that was fairly startling.

Old Flip, who a moment before was grinning across the rail in placid enjoyment, had, on sight of the proprietor of the Lucky Venture, at first started up in wild astonishment, then, with his mouth wide open and his eyes fairly starting from their sockets, had thrown himself straight backward, flinging up his hands.

Pancake Pete received him on his breast, and supported him in his arms.

"What's the row, ole stockin's?" he cried into the bumper's ear. "Air ye gittin' nuggets? Did that frosty gent strike ye whar ye live?—yes he did!"

Old Flip mumbled something which probably would have been unintelligible even had it not been drowned in the bellowing of scores of voices about him, and struggled to free himself.

Instead of letting him go, Pancake Pete, who had accomplished his purpose even beyond his hopes, hustled him out of the crowd, keeping hold of him.

In the wild surging back and forth, amid the waving of torches and the swinging of hats and frantic yells, every one striving to get as near to the veranda as possible and swell the din to the utmost of his ability, only those whose interest was centered beforehand upon the actors in this little episode noticed it.

Cap Ledyard saw two things. First, that Gower had caught his principal with a sustaining arm, and, waving the other apologetically to the crowd, was assisting him back to the house.

"Thar'll be no further use for me hyar," was his reflection; "and the boys kin run the rest to suit themselves, blast 'em!"

In the second place, he saw Old Flip's disconcertion and flight, and Pancake Pete's accompaniment.

"Thar's my game," he muttered. "But what's that slippery whelp a-doin', slidin' out along o' him? If he cuts the dirt from under my feet I'll make him wish't he never was born!"

And abandoning his post of public trust and responsibility, he took himself out of the crowd.

Still another was sufficiently interested in Old Flip and his destinies to turn his back on "the balance of the blow-out."

Tow-head Ted was getting more and more bewildered by the complications of the situation as seen from his not very favorable standpoint.

The woman who had so pained Sarry Ann, and whom he, Tow-head Ted, therefore hated with all the dull bitterness of a foggy brain, had not only submitted to, but had even courted the caresses of this fellow, apparently on so different a social plane from her own. And now he, Pancake Pete, was hanging around Old Flip. What for? Had he been bribed to do him an ill turn? And why had Old Flip been so struck in a heap?

Tow-head Ted endeavored to work his way out of the press to follow them.

Unfortunately, the fear of losing them made him too precipitate. He jostled some fellow more roughly than the sufferer thought the occasion justified, or, at least, than he was disposed to quietly endure.

There was a sudden and profane demand as to what Tow-head Ted was "tryin' to git through him," followed instantly by a sounding *whack!*

Tow-head Ted reeled beneath a blow from a torch.

The men he fell against put him off, swearing lustily.

When roused to anger his disposition was not altogether angelic. He felt that he had been assaulted without justification. However, that was of little moment. His real grievance was that some one had struck him in anger. The blow hurt him; the anger which had incited it was a spark at which his heart took fire.

Half blinded, he "reached" for his assailant.

A furious commotion instantly followed.

Seen from the veranda, the torches all seemed to tend to this center, and just here they seemed to have gone mad.

Nora took fright, recalling accounts of how spectators are usually the lucky ones at catching stray bullets, and, clinging to La Blanchette fled through the window by which Gower and the colonel had just re-entered the cottage parlor.

Hearing her cry of alarm, the Professor had caught Gerald by the arm in time to restrain him from leaping over the veranda rail, very red in the face with indignation at having a fight take place before their house in the presence of their guests.

"The ruffians!" he growled, fiercely. "I'll whelt the fight out o' the pair o' them!"

"Look to yer sister!" commanded his father, forcing him toward the window to cover her retreat.

The Professor himself turned back and appealed to the crowd.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" he cried, "will yez have over? But this is disgraceful! Shame! shame!"

The cry was taken up, and a determined effort made to separate the combatants.

Secure within the house, Nora gazed about her, to see that all she loved were safe.

Colonel Wallingford was back in his chair in the corner, a cowering wretch who strove vainly to preserve the outward semblance of manhood.

Gower was preparing to mix another hot whisky.

The lawyer's face was Sphinx-like. It baffled even La Blanchette's keen eyes. A Chinaman could not have been, outwardly, more simply solicitous for his patron's health.

But the actress had now a clew which caused her to abandon her first surmise. It was plain that the encounter was an equal shock to both these men. Their fear was mutual.

But Pancake Pete had brought them face to face. She felt sure that he had stationed Old Flip there. And what was it that he had cried, to attract the colonel's attention? He must know more than he had confided to her. But what was his motive for concealment? She determined to bolt him through a very fine interrogatory sieve on their next meeting.

Lastly, Gerald had obeyed his father with a docility that was rare, to say the least of it.

Seeing all these, yet hearing her father's voice without, the devoted girl sprung back through the casement, and threw her arms about her parent, crying:

"Father! oh, father!"

"It's all right, mavourneen!" was his tender assurance, as he put his arm about her shoulders, and led her back into the house. "They've caged the cubs—for the moment at least."

As "sore" spiritually as he was physically, Tow-head Ted trudged off toward the camp, with no particular destination in view, brooding on thoughts of direful vengeance.

It is perhaps needless to say that they never came to anything.

But, alas! in his blind rage he had forgotten all about Old Flip!

CHAPTER XXIII.

"GOOD-BY JOHN!"

PANCAKE PETE followed up his quaking victim.

"I say, ole man," he declared, "I want ye to chalk one thing down whar ye kin git at it handy. I'm yer solid friend, I am, through blue blazes an' black blizzards!"

And he clapped the old bumper on the back with a blow that nearly knocked him down.

"What call hev you fur to stand by me, anyway?" whined Old Flip, suspiciously. "I hain't had a square night's sleep sence you struck the camp, I hain't!"

"Ye hain't, hey?" cried Pancake Pete, in seeming astonishment. "Waal, b'gee! I'd like to know ef I hain't been jest a-layin' of myself out, ever sence I *did* strike this hyar hole of a place, all fur to make ye happy? Hain't I laid out money on ye, fur to keep yer ole sluice-box well 'iled? Didn't I call on ye with my best respects t'other mornin'? An' what did I git fur it, b'gosh? A shootin'-iron poked under my nose! But, I say, pard, consarn yer ole pictur'! that thar wa'n't so bad! Haw! haw! haw!—the leetle skeezicks!"

And again he dealt Old Flip a tap of affection that might have come from a young grizzly.

"But what air ye a-doin' of it fur?" persisted the bumper. "I don't know you!"

"But I know you, my boy!"

And, disclosed by the moonlight, Pancake Pete dropped the whole of one side of his face in a confidential wink.

Old Flip shuddered, and hastily drew away from him.

"Oh, it's all right!" was the assurance of the "Pride o' the Perairies." "Didn't I tell ye I was yer solid friend?"

For a time Old Flip only hurried his pace. How could he "shake" this unwelcome well-wisher?

But presently, with a desperate resolve to know the worst, he asked:

"Pard, what *did* ye shout out, thar?"

"Out whar?" asked Pancake Pete, knowing well enough what was meant.

"Why, jist now, to the Perfesser's house," explained Old Flip, tremulously, afraid to venture too far on treacherous ground.

"Hooray for the ladies!" replied Pancake Pete, innocently.

"No! no! after that. Jist now!"

"Oh! Jist now. When yer stomach caved in, ye mean, an' the colonel he went down the main shaft on the run?"

"Yes!" breathed Old Flip, faintly.

"Waal! I says *Matt!* says I—*Matt!* An' you bet yer sweet life he *hyeared* me!"

Pancake Pete chuckled at the recollection of his master-stroke.

Old Flip quailed as if under the lash, and was silent again.

But he was not satisfied yet. He *must* know what to fear. After a period of hoarse breathing, he ventured again.

"What did ye say that fur?"

"*Hey!*" cried Pancake Pete, stopping short and staring into the white face of the bumper. Old Flip cowered and shook.

Pancake Pete favored him with another prodigious wink.

"Oh, I know a thing ur two, I do! I wa'n't born *yistiddy!*"

And leaving the enigma there, he walked on.

"I say, pard," he went on, in a different tone, "you're losin' yer grip, you air. You want somethin' warmin' on the inside, fur to put a leetle heart in ye. Come along o' me, an' I'll pour double-distilled delight into ye worse'n the water goin' down the Devil's Stirabout."

And he pointed his joke with another wink.

"No! I allow I'll go home!" gasped Old Flip.

"Waal, come to look you over, I reckon meb-by you'd better," said Pete. "But, pard!"—and he clutched the bumper's arm in a grip of iron—"don't *stay* thar! I'm yer solid friend! Git!"

By way of a god-speed, he gave him a push in the direction of his shanty.

With a mumbling cry of terror, Old Flip fled as fast as his quaking legs would carry him, to be followed by the mocking laugh of Pancake Pete.

"I'll hev to cut an' run fur it!" he mumbled to himself. "Before the light of another day I'll take my fool carcass out o' this hyar trap. What fur did I ever come back to it?"

But there was another hand in this game. Cap Ledyard was "bound to have his show."

He had hung upon the heels of the fugitive and his "solid friend," to be astonished by the manner of their parting.

"What in Cain is that galoot up to, anyway?" he asked himself.

However, Old Flip was the man he was after; and leaving Pancake Pete to go his way, he turned into a path different from that taken by either, and set out at a headlong run that really endangered his neck.

He gained the vicinity of the tree that spanned the canyon some minutes before Old Flip.

There, in the dense shadows of the mountain pines, he ran into what had the appearance of strange company. Half a score of figures rose around him, in the fluttering garments of the Flowery Kingdom.

"Hyar ye air, boys! All ready?"

"You bet!"

"Waal, he's a-comin'!"

"It's his last trip!"

"How's the girl?"

"As quiet as a lamb. We'll git a signal from Jake, ef she—"

A clear, sweet call of a night bird cut short the sentence.

"That's Jake now, ain't it?"

"It ain't nothin' else."

"She's out, then."

"That's what's the matter with Hannah."

"We'll have a sweet mess!"

"You've got to take the fat along o' the lean, Cap."

"You're sure o' the boys on the other side?"

"They're all right, Cap. I posted every one o' them myself."

"Who air they?"

And to assure himself, Cap drew close to each of the men about him, to ascertain their identity.

They were all his satellites, masquerading in the garments of the imprisoned Celestials.

"How do ye like yer togs, boys?" he asked them, with a laugh.

"They're a mite airy, Cap, fur a fact."

"Is the blind ready?"

"Hyar ye have him."

Bending over the spot indicated, Cap saw the figure of the Chinaman who had been most severely wounded by the claim-jumpers. He was now bound and gagged. His painful breathing and a low moan now and then, were evidence of his suffering.

"But it strikes me," said Ledyard, "that that galoot is a long time gittin' hyar."

"Cap! Cap!" called a voice, excitedly, yet guardedly.

"What's the row now?"

"He's got by us!"

"The deuce he has!"

"He has, I say! Look a' thar!"

It was true that Old Flip was between them and the bridge.

Haunted by the dread of secret foes set in ambush by the man the sight of whom had so unnerved him, to be equally unnerved in turn, he had avoided the path he usually followed, and by a circuitous route had flanked his real enemies.

"After him! after him!" commanded Cap, in a hoarse whisper.

And being himself by this time disguised in a Chinese dress, he plunged forward with a jabbering cry, in imitation of Celestials under excitement.

He was followed by all his men; and their onset was like the scudding of a flock of geese.

Old Flip looked back, and with a yell of terror sped away in flight.

At that instant Sarry Ann appeared in the moonlit space at the other end of the tree-trunk.

That day had been a bitter one for her. She had eaten her heart out in solitude. Under the circumstances, she, of course, could not seek Nora; and because of the arrival of Colonel Wallingford, Nora, as well as Gerald, had been prevented from going to her.

It was natural that she should picture them to herself as forgetful of her in the society of their city friend. She felt deserted by all the world—more alone than ever before in her life.

The sound of the fife and drum at the Riffle added to this feeling. While others were enjoying themselves, she sat alone, and in tears.

As the sound of the drum died out in the distance, she felt as if all the pleasant, living world was going away from her; and when all was deathly still she felt a prey to a horrible sense of desolation and impending evil.

For the first time in her life she became timorous. She had never before realized the utter seclusion of the spot she called home. Now she fancied that she heard strange sounds; and she fell to shivering and cowering.

At last she could endure that no longer; and summoning all her resolution to her aid, and telling herself that she must keep her usual watch for her father, she ventured out.

She reached the bridge in time to see her father fleeing before what both supposed to be a band of Chinamen.

She knew of his iniquitous assault on them. This, then, was their revenge. She had been distressed and humiliated by the wrong. Would not Gerald despise her, the daughter of a man capable of such deeds? But, with his life menaced, she was ready to fight the world in his defense. He was her father still.

Luckily she never went unarmed. She now drew her revolver, and ran with the fleetness of a deer across the tree-trunk, gaining the other side as the old man came up.

She had no thought of the danger into which she herself ran. What had she to hope from these enraged Pagans, if captured by them? But she had watched that wretched old bum for years, with more than a mother's solicitude; and now her only thought was to get him across the bridge in safety and within the shelter of the shanty, where they might make a defense until help came.

"Sarry Ann! Sarry Ann!" he cried, like a terrified child.

And he would have clung to her for protection, so thoroughly unnerved was he.

But she shook him off.

"Don't hang to me!" she cried. "Go over the gap, and into the house. Don't try to run across, but be careful, and take your time. I'll keep them back."

And intrepidly she faced the mob, shouting:

"Keep off, you devils! The first man that comes into that spot of moonlight dies!"

They stopped, and huddled together, chattering like magpies.

Sarry Ann congratulated herself on their cowardice, and began to plan her own escape across the tree-trunk.

"As long as I face them," she reflected, "I hold them; but the minute my back is turned they will set upon me like wolves on a wounded antelope."

If she had only guessed that under that "blind" Cap Ledyard was giving his men directions!

Old Flip dropped on all-fours, and proceeded to shuffle across the tree-trunk, blubbering:

"Sarry Ann! oh, Sarry Ann!"

"Father," she cried, "when you are across, get up and cover them till I follow you."

"What's that yer say?" he whined, too much distracted to attend to what was said to him.

The girl repeated her directions, and, having gained the other side, he turned to obey.

At that moment a pistol exploded in Cap Ledyard's hand.

The unerring aim found Old Flip "whar he lived," and with a shriek of agony and terror he fell backward.

Dismayed, Sarry Ann turned, and saw him writhing so near the verge of the cliff that she feared he would roll off.

With a shriek of mingled rage, pain and fear, she sent half the contents of her revolver into the crowd of his murderers, and turning, fled to his assistance.

Casting herself upon him, she called to him wildly:

"Father! father! oh, speak to me!"

But he only moaned, struggling feebly.

Then she sought to lift his body in her arms, and bear it to the shanty.

In the anguish of that moment she might have lifted him and carried him; but she saw that their foes would overtake her long before

she could reach the shanty. Already they were flocking down to the other end of the bridge.

Then the heroic girl set herself to defend her dead. Kneeling beside the old man, she presented her revolver, with the fierce determination to drop them one by one into the rushing creek below, if they dared to expose themselves in the broad moonlight on the tree-trunk.

But meanwhile she must have help; and as the shots in her revolver and in Old Flip's brace were now pearls of price, since she would be allowed little opportunity for reloading, she lifted up her voice in a series of shrieks that cleft the silence of the night like a knife.

"Hang me, ef that hussy will ever die of consumption!" muttered Captain Ledyard. "What air them fools waitin' fur? To hev her fetch the bull riffle down on us— Ah!"

The last ejaculation was one of satisfaction.

Forth from the shadows at Sarry Ann's back stole an Oriental figure, bearing a shawl spread out in his hands.

It had fallen from the head and shoulders of the girl on her first starting forward to the relief of her father.

A twig snapped under the foot of the stealing figure.

Sarry Ann turned her head just in time to see the shawl descending over her.

In an instant, before she could offer the slightest resistance, she was enveloped and her voice drowned.

In vain her struggles. She was in a grip of steel. Her captor did not utter a word.

It took but a moment to suffocate her into unconsciousness, when she was picked off her feet and hurried away.

"That was a beauty!" said Cap, delighted with this part of his work. "She'll never drop to the chap that took her in."

"Now, boys, back fur the stiff! We'll make a stiff of him in short meter, anyway."

Two men ran back, and soon reappeared bearing the wounded Chinaman between them.

All crossed over the canyon, and gathered about the fallen bum.

"Is he dead?" asked Cap, as he came up.

"He looks it. You plugged him plumb center."

"Sock a knife into him a half-dozen times."

The man ordered so coolly to such hellish work shrunk back with an oath.

"I never done nothin' like that, Cap," he said. "I wouldn't mind it, ef he was warm an' kickin'; but to drive a long six home in cold meat!"

"Look hyar, Jake Fortescue!" growled Cap; "you're gittin' too chicken-hearted to live long in this gang! You'll be blowin' on yer pals one o' these days, fur to save yer worthless neck, I never knowed no good out of a man what gagged at his gruel!"

And whipping a long bowie out of the leg of his boot, he bent and executed his own command, as coolly as if he were jabbing the blade into a mound of earth.

"Mebbe your stummick is too watery fur to let ye fix that thar Heathen Chine?"

"Them's hogs," said Jake. "But Old Flip was a white man, an' that makes a big differ. How'll ye hev this one?"

"Put a bullet in him. Hyar, from the ole man's tool. This hyar may hev to stand a mite of investigatin'."

And he handed over Old Flip's revolver, that the bullet, if it came to so close a test, might be found of the right size.

When the Chinaman saw that he was to be sacrificed he pleaded piteously:

"Good John! good John! No make bobbery 'long that 'Melican man!"

But Fortescue sought to redeem himself in the eyes of his chief by the cold-blooded deliberation with which he "sent him home."

"Good-by, John," he said. "You won't make no bobbery along o' nobody in this world no more."

And aiming at his heart, he pulled trigger.

There was a gasp, a quiver, and the poor wretch lay still.

"An' now, git!" commanded Cap.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CAP GETS THE PINS SET UP.

THE ovation to Colonel Wallingford had had a most unsatisfactory ending. The boys turned about, and strode home in "blue" silence.

The Fire Department lost all the glory of its ordered ranks, and became a straggling mob.

Bulge-eye Billy swore that he never had a fair day but it rained. Stumpy Stiles said nothing. It had come to that—the double drag had not been appreciated! It was a case of pearls cast before swine! He walked with his drum-head turned to his leg.

As a result of this silence, they received warning of the tragedy at Old Flip's shanty much sooner than they would have done, if they had returned as bravely as they went.

"Hark!" cried Sam Brown, stopping suddenly to listen.

Then from far down the valley was heard three pistol-shots in quick succession. They were Sarry Ann's despairing return for the shot that had laid her father on his back.

"Hyar's fun, anyway!" cried Brown. "Who's in fur it?"

They were all "in for it," as they testified by a concerted yell, and they broke into a dead run for the camp.

Their torches burned blue, and then went out altogether, to be thrown aside without regret. The pomp and circumstance of the parade were over, and the moonlight would serve for the work to which they now "buckled down."

As they neared the camp they were met by Pancake Pete and Tow-head Ted, followed by several pale-lipped women.

Pancake Pete had reached the camp, and was making himself "very promiscuous," when the alarm was heard in the direction of Old Flip's shanty. He had set out to investigate it accompanied by the women, and they had come upon Tow-head Ted returning.

Such was his explanation, made in his peculiar style.

"Waal, thar won't no good come o' chinnin' hyar!" growled Brown, with the sullen anger of a man who takes rage by contagion, as dogs show their teeth when one of their number snarls.

Turning about, the crowd ran toward the scene of violence.

As they ran in silence, now in the shadow, and anon scudding across a patch of moonlight, a man's identity was not easily made out, without getting close and gazing scrutinizingly into his face.

For the most part, no one cared particularly who might chance to be his neighbor; but, as they neared the bridge, Brown, who was in the van, found a rival who was contesting the place with him.

"Is that you, Cap?" he asked.

"It ain't nobody else," was the reply.

"What do you 'low it is?"

"Give it up."

"We'll dog soon know."

This dialogue, panted out, did not show enough of the color to pay for washing.

A moment later they came upon the two bodies.

"Hold on, hyar!" shouted Cap, immediately assuming command, as was his right. "Don't you cattle come trampin' out the signs. Thar's been some bad work hyar, as'll lead up a tree fur somebody, ur I lose my guess. You, Jim! keep that gang back tell we git the lay o' things."

He addressed one of his satellites, and any one familiar with the actors in the scene of a few minutes before on that spot would have been surprised to see how many were ready at his bidding.

Instantly after the success of their ambush, they had doffed their disguises, and while a few of their number carried them away with the prisoner, the bulk followed their leader, to rejoin the crowd of their fellow-citizens unnoticed.

"It's the ole man, sure enough," said Cap, bending over him. "They've laid him out fur keeps, I reckon. But what's this hyar? A Chimeeser—waa! I swar! Hey! what d'ye make o' that, Brown?"

"They've come back at him fur jumpin' of 'em."

"It'll be your turn next. Waal, he's salted one of 'em, anyhow."

And Cap kicked the body of the Celestial, rolling out a volley of savage oaths.

"Hyar! bear a hand," he shouted to his followers. "Hyar's one pig-tail what'll never go back to China; an' don't you furgit it!"

They lifted the body at his direction, and giving it a swing or two, tossed it into the yawning gulf of the canyon.

The witnesses attributed this act to a sentiment of revenge. The fact was, that Cap had discovered life yet in the body, and adopted this summary means of forestalling possible trouble in the future.

The splash of the falling body was heard above the general swash of the rushing water. The crowd peered over the verge of the cliff into the depths below, some kneeling, some lying flat, and all fain to hold to some fixed object against the chance of slipping over.

As the moon was almost in the zenith, it shone directly down upon the foaming torrent, turning its surface into coruscating silver.

They saw a dark object rise from the depths, and then sink from sight, only to be again brought to the surface by the current as it was hurried on to its final submergence in the Devil's Stirabout.

When it was gone, a sigh passed from lip to lip. Some rose and drew back in awed silence; some could not drag themselves away from the fascination of the ghastly scene, but stared on at the whirlpool where it had been last seen.

It was Tow-head Ted's voice that roused them to a new interest.

He rushed up from the direction of the shanty whither he had run on seeing Old Flip stretched on the rock.

"Look a-hyar, gents!" he panted, with almost a "blubber" in his voice, "this ain't right! Whar's Sarry Ann?"

"That's so!" cried Cap with an oath, as if he had not thought of her till now.

"It must 'a' been her screechin'," suggested one of the men.

"Hold on! hold on!" cried Cap, lifting his hands as if to check a dreaded announcement. "Ye don't mean to say—"

And there he stopped and gazed about with horror in his eyes.

All got the impression he meant to convey. A low, rumbling murmur ran through the crowd.

"Hold on!" he repeated, clinching his fists. "Before we go any further I want every man hyar to take his Bible oath that he'll clean out everything as wears a pig-tail that he kin lay his hands on between hyar an' Frisco."

A howl of savage fury responded to this appeal.

"That's enough," he said. "Now come on."

There was a rush made for the shanty. It was found to be empty, just as the girl had left it.

But one of the men had found something on the way. That he was one of the marshal's body-guard might have had a peculiar significance, if there had been the slightest suspicion of the truth, which there was not.

It was a piece of calico which several knew to be of the pattern of Sarry Ann's dress.

"Boys," said Cap, "I hate to hev these hyar p'ison words to speak; but thar's only one thing fur it—they've got her!"

Again that rumbling thunder of malignant resentment was elicited.

"Now, one crowd can't do all the huntin'. My gang ain't big enough."

"Draft the hull camp!"

"That's jest what I mean to do. An' nary a white man eats ur sleeps tell we git back an' hev opened a coyote butcher-shop with them heathens."

A yell of indorsement greeted this sentiment, and attested Sarry Ann's place in the regard of the camp.

Tow-head Ted could have wrung Cap's hand in expression of his gratitude for this vigorous action. His heart was in his throat.

"Thar's no use in rammin' around at loose ends," pursued Cap, "one gang trampin' over ground that's already been worked by another, an' leavin' gaps that nobody prospects. We want to chalk the whole thing down, an' go at it systematic."

Thereupon he selected half a dozen of the leading men of the Riffle, to act as captains of the various search parties. Three were members of his body-guard, and three not. Of the latter was Sam Brown.

Again, to the uninitiated, there was nothing significant in this arrangement.

But when they had retired into the shanty to map out the course of each, it is needless to say that Cap had for his route the only one on which there was any chance of finding traces of the abductors. Further, all the men of his party were creatures of his will.

"Now," he said to himself, "the chap as kin bowl down them pins before I get ready will hev a mighty long head on him!"

"Me bold brigadier, I'll wait on ye in the mornin'!"

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO SHARPERS.

THE news of the tragedy fell like a thunder-clap on the cottage.

Gerald was wild with distress and frantic in his hatred of the Chinamen. He had been their defender all along; but now they had turned and stung him. He literally carried out Cap's charge, neither eating nor sleeping in his quest of his love.

Nora was prostrated by the blow. She wept and moaned almost incessantly, chiding herself for not having visited her friend on that day which must have been so full of pain for her.

Secretly congratulating herself on being relieved of one who might have stood materially in her way, La Blanchette affected just the right shade of feeling for the occasion.

The Professor's pain was equal to that of his children, though tempered in its expression.

Gower watched his principal.

The shock of his meeting with Old Flip had left Colonel Wallingford almost a wreck. He was having a nervous chill when the news of the tragedy was brought to the cottage.

At first he seemed stunned. Then he was goaded to a wild exhilaration. He got up from the bed to which they had insisted upon his retiring, and walked the floor, wringing his hands and muttering to himself.

Later came the intelligence that Old Flip was yet alive. He had been carried to the hotel, where Doc Burgess had examined and dressed his wounds, and declared that if it were left to him to say whether the old bummer was to live or die, he would have to toss up a cent to find out.

"Boys," had been Doc's characteristic conclusion, "to show ye that I hain't no prejudice in the matter, I'll bet ary man ten dollars either way. I'll bet ary man that dares, ten dollars that he don't live twenty-four hours. I'll bet ary man ten dollars that he lives six months. What! no takers? Waal, this always was a hole of a place, anyway! I'll bet ary man a drink o' whisky that thar ain't ten dollars in the crowd!"

But on the receipt of this news, Colonel Wallingford seemed to collapse. A dogged, ferocious despair took possession of him. There was no use in trying to run away from fate. If the blow was prepared to fall, he was powerless to avert it. Let it come!

Then Gower proved invaluable to him.

"Look here," he said. "All this is no business of mine. I do not seek any confidences. But I have eyes in my head, and I know that you're on the wrong track. Up, and meet it, like a man! No good ever came of waiting for something to turn up. Turn it up!"

Colonel Wallingford seized his arm, fairly cowering at his feet.

"You do not know?" he panted.

"Nor care to," replied the lawyer. "You must act by and for yourself. But, whether or no, you must act!"

"If I had an adviser; oh, if I might have an adviser!" groaned the wretched man. "My brain is in a whirl! I can think of nothing!"

"At any rate, you must up and out of this. Make a bold stand. He is as much afraid of you as you are of him. When you push a man of that sort with fear and pull him with money, you can lead him at will. Moreover, you must make yourself active in this search."

"See! Matters have shaped themselves to your hand. If she owes her recovery to you, you can make your own terms with her."

"What am I to do?"

"Offer a reward."

"Will you act for me? Use your own discretion in everything."

"But that won't do. He must see you act boldly. If you will be guided by me, you will go to him and browbeat him into subjection."

"Never! never!" gasped the colonel.

However, in the morning he declared himself much better, thanked his entertainers, and rode away to the Riffle.

There was no need for disguise now, and he dispensed with the muffle that had hidden the lower part of his face.

He offered a thousand dollars reward for the recovery of Sarry Ann unharmed, and five hundred for her, dead or alive.

As he got into the spirit of the thing, he plucked up heart, and put himself in communication with the leaders of the camp, having first offered them an apology for his poor return of their courtesy of the night before.

Meanwhile Pancake Pete had had an interview with Cap Ledyard.

"Well," he said, "you have made a bold beginning. It's a pity that it should have miscarried somewhat."

"What do you mean?" demanded Cap, staring at him, as if at a loss to comprehend his insinuation.

"Mean?" repeated Pete, a little taken back.

"Yes, mean!" insisted Cap.

"Well," replied Silver Riffle Sid, seeing that there was to be a test of nerve, "it ought to be pretty plain that I refer *distantly* to Old Flip and his daughter."

"Waal, what about Old Flip and his daughter?"

"The former is alive—that's where the thing has miscarried. The latter is in safe-keeping; and the way in which it has been brought about is what I call a bold stroke."

"But what has that got to do with *me*? You said that I—"

Silver Riffle Sid put his finger against his nose, and closed one eye.

"Oh, come, now!" he interrupted. "That's all right; but it won't go down with yer uncle! Look hyar! I'll give you some points that won't cost you anything. One!—you followed up Old Flip last night. Two!—a lot of your crowd suddenly turned up, who hadn't been at the ovation. Three!—the Chinaman you dumped in the drink wasn't dead yet. Four!—it was one of your men that found the bit of the girl's dress. In the excitement, any one else would probably have passed it by unnoticed. That was the lamest move you made. The case was plain enough without it."

"How's that, so far?"

"That's wind, that is!"

"All right! You put me in Brown's gang. Brown went north; you went south."

"I suddenly had an idea. I remembered that during the day I had seen some marks of junk shoes on the road to Fresno. I proposed to Brown that we steal a march on you fellows, bag our game, and go into camp with flying colors."

"He told me that he had his orders, and he always obeyed orders if he broke owners."

"I told him that was all right for him, but I believed I saw a point, and I proposed to go for it, if I had to go on my own hook."

"He told me to go to the devil; and I went after you."

"The deuce ye did!"

"I was not greatly surprised to find that you were not particularly zealous in your search."

"What's the reason I wa'n't?"

"Instead of searching as you went along, you passed very likely places to hide in, and made a straight course for—"

"You follered me up?"

"To the very mouth of a certain hole in the

hill most cleverly hidden by fallen rocks and trailing vines."

Then Cap "came down." Could Sid have bettered the scheme?

"No. The one defect is that the old man is yet kicking. Remember, the girl is worth nothing until he is fixed for good and all."

"The colonel has offered a thousand dollars for her."

"Could he do less? He is the one wealthy man in the place. He has a reputation to sustain in Frisco, where he has given as much as that to build a church steeple."

"Has he? Is he pious?"

"He is anything that pays. But how about Old Flip?"

"We'll see about that!" said Cap.

CHAPTER XXVI.

OLD FLIP "CALLS THE HOUSE."

OLD FLIP lay in a heap in the middle of a straw tick which rose all about him like the sides of a buffalo wallow. A smaller straw tick served him as a pillow, and a gray army blanket was his only spread.

A bloody bandage was bound around his head, and examination would have disclosed sundry other bandages and strips of sticking-plaster variously disposed over his body.

Doc Burgess called his work with the sticking-plaster "frescoing."

On a shelf over the head of the bunk stood a cracked cup, with a tin spoon laid over the top. It was flanked by a pannikin of gruel.

All in all, the old man and his surroundings made a far from pleasant spectacle.

"Doc," he whined, tremulously, "what's my chances?"

"Waal, old man," replied Doc, looking down upon his patient with no particular concern, "I've been tryin' to strike up a bet on your case with some o' these hyar snoozers as is always keen fur to make a stake."

"An' which side was ye fur bettin' on, Doc?"

"Oh, I was leavin' it to them. Pitch the trump yerselves, gents, says I; an' then you won't have nothin' to growl about. You kin suit me to death, and not half try."

"But hain't you no opinion, Doc?"

"Opinion! Waal, I 'low ter hev. But I don't put up my money on a dead sure thing, an' then challenge no man to cover it."

"A dead-sure thing! Not a *dead-sure* thing, Doc?"

"Waal, by Mercury and by Mars! maybe you've got money as says I don't know what I'm talkin' about. Don't be back'ards about comin' for'ards! Your money's as good as any other man's."

And Doc pulled out his wallet and slapped it in his hand, ready for instant business.

"Waal, I swar!" he exclaimed; "ef I've been rakin' this hull camp fur a galoot with an ounce o' sand, to find it right to my hand!"

"I hain't no money to put up on it, Doc. But ye *don't* mean to say that I'm checked clear through!"

"Ef I had a stack o' Comstocks as 'ud fill that thar bed-tick what ye're a-layin' on, an' you'd put up yer I O U ag'in' it, I'd go my pile—"

"Hold on, Doc! fur God's sake, hold on! *Don't* shove me under ground before the breath's out o' my body!"

"Oh, waal, I thought ye was achin' to know—"

"But I don't want to know nothin'!"

And with this unsatisfactory prospect Old Flip was left to his sufferings and his conscience.

Lying there alone, he had plenty of time to think. Perhaps the nearness of death steadied him and forced him to come to some conclusion.

"I hain't done the squar' thing by the gal, an' that's a fact," he said, with a sniff. "Mebby ef I do my level best to deal her a lone hand, they'll put it in the reckonin' on t'other side."

Old Flip's morality had a considerable admixture of self-interest; but then, there are better men than he against whom the same charge would lie.

When he had about made up his mind to count one for Sarry Ann and two for himself, a faint, hesitating knock was heard on the door.

"Walk!" he called, adding with a whine: "I 'low it's about time. I'm nigh starved to death!"

The latch was lifted, and the door opened far enough to admit a head.

It was not a very good-looking head, but an honest one—the head of Tow-head Ted.

"How's yer comin' on, ole man?" he asked, with a very unsuccessful attempt to whisper.

"Mighty bad!"

We give the spirit, rather than the letter, of Old Flip's petulant reply; for it must be admitted, with regret, that the force of habit led him to express himself rather more forcibly.

"Air you goin' fur to stand thar gawpin' at me all day?" he added. "I tell ye I'm so holler that Stumpy could play the double drag on my gizzard, an' you'd never know the difference, from the sound."

Tow-head Ted sidled into the room, with his hat held in his hand. Coming into a possible

chamber of death, he suffered something like the embarrassment with which he would have entered a parlor.

"What'll ye hev?" he asked. "Jerry's ole woman, she's a-fryin' of some bacon. I hyeared it, an' smelt it too, as I come up the stairs."

"I cain't eat bacon!" whined the old man.

"D'ye think I've got the stomach of a boss?"

"Waal, I don't know," said Ted, apologetically.

"Thar'd orter be some gruel up thar on the shelf."

Tow-head Ted got the pannikin down, and began to feed the sufferer awkwardly with a spoon.

"They're leavin' of me hyar to rot, all alone by myself!" whined Old Flip, the tears beginning to roll down his cheeks. "Sarry Ann wouldn't sarve me like this hyar. Thar's that jade, Moll, as I'm feein' fur to look arter me, an' Brown he guaranteed to see that she had it out o' the claim. But, what's the use? Such a hardscrabble set as hangs out in this hyar camp, the Lord never set eyes on before!"

Tow-head Ted ventured no opinion on this subject. Another lay nearer his heart.

"I say, ole man," he broke in, "I've got a notion in my ole top-knot—a dog-gone queer one, you *will* allow."

"What sort of a notion?" asked Old Flip.

"Why, that thar's somethin' snide in this hyar business, all round."

"Snide! Waal, I allow it *is* snide!"

"Oh! not that thar way what *you're* a-thinkin' about."

"Waal, what way, then?"

"About these hyar Heathen Chinees an' sich."

"What's the matter with the Chinees?" asked Old Flip, warily, adding: "Blast 'em! they've cooked *my* goose fur me!"

"Pard," said Ted, apparently jumping to another subject. "Who's this hyar Pancake Pete?"

"Who's Pancake Pete?" repeated the old man, staring at his questioner.

"Yes. Do you know him? Did you ever see him before t'other day?"

"I 'low I never did; an' it'll do my soul good ef I don't never see him ag'in!"

Tow-head Ted scratched his shock of frowsy hair. Cross-examination was not his "best holt." On the other hand, he did not see his way clear to the statement of his suspicions.

"What's he been hangin' around you fur, anyway?" he finally ventured.

"That's what I'd like to know!" cried Old Flip. "Blow me ef I don't b'lieve he's brung me all my hard luck!"

"What fur? Did you ever do him ary bad turn?"

"I tell ye I never see him before."

"Say! d'you s'pose he could be in anybody's pay, to give you a back-hander?"

"What *air* you tryin' fur to git through you, anyway?" cried Old Flip, striving to rise up in bed, but falling back again with a sharp cry of pain.

"Keep yer shirt on!" advised Tow-head Ted, in all seriousness, as his anxious eyes attested.

He then made another skip in his investigations; and now his brows knit, and his eyes darkened with sullen dislike.

"Who's this hyar daisy heifer what's a-stop-pin' up to the Professor's?"

"Eh!" ejaculated Old Flip, sharply.

Into his eyes came a sudden piercing look of inquiry. But he seemed to let a mask drop as suddenly over his face again, and answered:

"Blow me ef I know."

"Waal, I know a thing ur two about her!" said Ted, viciously.

"What d'ye know?" asked Old Flip, with a wary contraction of the eyes.

"I know that she's the heiress what's been pegg'n' away a-courtin' of it ag'in' Colonel Wallingford fur Walt Caswell's share o' the Lucky Venture. Now, what has sich like got to do, by rights, with a galoot like Pancake Pete?—that's what I want to know."

"With Pancake Pete? What *has* she got to do with Pancake Pete?"

"A heap, you *will* allow. Didn't I ketch 'em a-lolligaggin' up to Bald Bank?"

"The deuce you did?"

"You better b'lieve I did. An', pard, she balked at his beard; an', by the jumpin' Jingo! he took it off!"

Old Flip stared in astonishment; and then becoming quiet and wary, he asked:

"Is that so?"

"That's so," insisted Ted. "An', ole man, ye hyear *me*? That thar she-dodger hain't no good word fur you, an' she hain't no good word fur Sarry Ann!"

Without seeming to be moved by this insinuation, Old Flip drew from Tow-head Ted a full account of what he had seen at Bald Bank.

"An' now this hyar ain't all," continued Ted. "Didn't Cap Ledyard run this hyar Pancake Pete out o' camp the minute he sot eyes on him? An' didn't they come back cheek by jowl, like a couple o' suckin' pigs? An' hain't they been thicker'n thieves ever sense, on the sly? An' what's the reason Pancake Pete he shakes Brown's gang, an' goes to prowlin' around arter Cap Ledyard; an' Cap Ledyard he an' his gang

sets around an' takes it easy, playin' off to look fur Sarry Ann?"

"I've been watchin' o' this hyar leetle game, an' I sw'ar it's all under the table!"

As he proceeded Tow-head Ted had worked himself into a fever of excitement. Though he restrained his voice, as if fearful of being overheard, he spoke with fierce intensity, gesticulating with clinched fists, while his voice broke and quivered with the cadences of keen distress. Sweat stood in beads on his forehead, and his eyes filled with tears.

"I tell ye it's snide!" he urged, passionately. "It's snide all round! Thar's somethin' a-goin' on hyar; an' blow me ef I kin jest make it out. I'm a-workin' in the dark, an' I hain't got no show; an' that's what's the matter with me!"

"Look a-hyar, ole man!" he went on, his tone suddenly changing from helpless protest to pleading, "kin I speak my mind?"

"What's to hender?" asked Old Flip.

"Why, ye see, you moughtn't like it; ye mought 'low as I was snoopin' whar I didn't b'long. But I've stuck by you through thick an' thin, an' I've stuck by Sarry Ann. Ye hain't got nobody solider fur ye every time than I be."

"I know that, pard," admitted Old Flip. "You've stood by me when a dog would 'a' shook me, an' that's a fact."

"Waal, then! Won't you give me a p'int in this hyar thing? What's the reason this hyar Pancake Pete he floored you, t'other night? An' what's the reason he posted you right in front o' the winder, so's't when the colonel come out, he knocked you all in a heap, an' he couldn't stand up hisself fur sour apples? An' what's he a-doin' hyar all of a sudden, when he wa'n't never hyar before? An' what's this hyar woman what's fit him in the courts tooth an' nail—what's she doin' hyar along of him as sweet as new milk? An' what air they all down on Sarry Ann fur, the hull raft o' 'em?"

"I'll sw'ar that they hired them Chinees to sperrit her off, among 'em!"

This last burst was what had been burdening Tow-head Ted's heart ever since he entered the room. It was a cry of despair. He felt powerless against so many and so high enemies.

But he had shed a flood of light into old Flip's mind. He was enabled to grasp the whole plot, or nearly so. But he fell into the error of supposing that it was all one.

"They've dropped on her somehow," he mused, "an' to me, too; an' they've put their heads together to shove us under ground. Waal, I 'low they'll find that the ole man ain't knocked out yit!"

"What's this hyar snoozer a-doin', comin' hyar to brass me out o' countenance! I've been dog fool enough to leave him a-rollin' in clover while he rooted my nose in the dirt fur sixteen years! What fur, I'd like to know? Ain't I as good a man as he? blast him! What's the reason I've been payin' his fiddler?"

"I'm fixed anyway; an' now I'll stand my ground an' fight him a round! I owe that much to Sarry Ann, as has pulled yoke an' yoke with me like a leetle major, an' never a whine."

"She never shook the ole man. Thar she stands as straight as ary queen, an' she says, says she—'This hyar's my father!' Good Lord! ef she only knowed!"

"An' thar's that jade as has got the cheek to step into her shoes, she was a-scornin' of me—she was! Waal, we'll see who holds the last trump in that thar leetle hand!"

The man was transformed. The cowering wretch whom we have thus far known was suddenly become a stubborn and dauntless foe. He had nothing to lose. The boys would not take him off of such a bed to hang him, even if his story was not wholly believed. On the other hand, all that there was left of manhood in his nature appealed to him to now seek to make some poor return for the life devotion of the noble girl who had borne her hard lot so patiently.

"Look a-hyar, Ted," he said. "This hyar thing's too big fur your head. You jest let me run it from this out. You've give me p'int as is worth somethin'—I don't deny that. Now, I reckon you'll stand by me an' by Sarry Ann."

"Tell the last dog's hung!"

"Waal, I want you to be my watch-dog while I salt some o' these hyar ladies an' gents down."

He then sent for writing-paper, envelopes, and a lead pencil.

Not without a great deal of pain, he wrote five brief notes, sealed and directed them, and gave them to Tow-head Ted to deliver.

"Now, mind yer eye!" was his charge. "You're to put these hyar into the hands o' the ones as they're addressed to, an' in each case nobody else is to see you do it."

"Jest yer rest'easy!" said Ted. "Boss, you've got 'em?"

"You bet!"

"That's all I want to know!"

And Ted took himself out of the room, without a misgiving. The change in Old Flip assured him that it was all right.

The letters were addressed severally as follows:

"Prof. P. Fitzgerald."

"Miss Blanche Champney."

"Col. Jonas Wallingford."

"Capt. Jack Ledyard."

"Pancake Pete, Esq."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TOW-HEAD TED SHOWS HIS TEETH.

COLONEL WALLINGFORD had quite persuaded himself that he had been frightened by a bug-bear.

"That old wreck is more afraid of me than I of him," he mused. "He knows that I hold the same old whip over him. If he had dared to move against me, he would have done it long ago. And now he may die at any moment."

He was just getting into a complacent frame of mind when:

"Boss, ef so be you'll excuse the liberty!"

Colonel Wallingford turned with a start. To indulge his reflections the more freely, he had wandered on the outskirts of the camp alone, with no thought of any one near.

Tow-head Ted stood bowing low, hat in hand. Certainly the only formidable thing about him was the note which he held out for the colonel's acceptance. That the latter eyed suspiciously.

"What is it?" he asked, not offering to take it, but rather drawing back.

Tow-head Ted looked at him in astonishment.

"Waal," he said, slowly, "I don't reckon but what most folks would allow it was a writin' o' some sort."

"But who is it from? What is it about?"

"Waal, thar, boss," replied Ted, scratching his head, "you git me, an' that's a fact. Ef I'd writ it, I could tell ye; but bein's as how I didn't, why, by the same token, it stands to reason, most men *would* allow, as how I ain't liken to know nothin' about it. But, ef so be you'll have the goodness to take the thing off my hands, an'll be to the trouble o' openin' it and readin' it fur yerself—"

There is no telling how long Ted would have spun this out, had not the colonel halted him impatiently.

"Who gave it to you?"

"Waal, I reckon, whar'fore an' whar'as the writer has most likely put his fist to the end of it, the letter itself will be what you *kin* depend on, in regards to who the aforesaid individual what you're so kind as to inquire after—"

"Give it to me!"

And the colonel snatched it.

"I'm obleeged to ye, sir!"

And with another scrape and bow, Tow-head Ted turned to take himself off.

"One moment!" interposed the colonel. "It may need a reply."

"Waal, I reckon it does," said Ted, dryly.

But this was lost on the colonel.

He had glanced hastily at the superscription, and failed to recognize it. It was written in what once must have been a clerkly hand, now made shaky and straggling by dissipation.

Then he had torn the envelope open with a sinking heart, and at a glance had turned deathly white.

Clutching the paper till it rattled in his tremulous grasp, he fairly devoured the line or two that made up the communication.

It read:

"MATT COREY:—You have a loud call to be at the Inter-ocean House, room 14, this 3 P. M."

"JAMES WINTERS, alias 'WHISKY SKIN.'"

"What do you know of this?" cried the colonel, crushing the sheet in his hand, and glaring at Tow-head Ted.

"Struck him whar he lives!" was the delighted reflection of our shock-headed friend.

But he only looked stupidly surprised.

"The which, boss?" he asked.

"I'm a fool!" was the colonel's angry self-condemnation. "What can such a fellow know?"

"But you do know who gave you this to bring to me; and, by Heaven! I'll have it out of you!"

Tow-head Ted looked at the excited man without any sympathetic rousing.

"Stranger," he said, slowly, "is that the way gents reach fur one another in Frisco?"

"It is my way!" retorted the colonel, fairly beside himself.

"Waal, you'll take a fool's advice, an' seek some more peaceful clime than this hyar. Ef you hang round the Riffle, an' let yerself out in that kind o' style, it won't be long before you wake up some fine mornin' an' find the top o' yer head blowed off! Bein's as you're a tenderfoot, so to speak, an' not knowin' to the ways o' the place, it ain't no more'n fair to give ye a show fur yer money; but the next time I'll call you in, as sure as you're a livin' sinner! You'd better go off some'ers in the shade, an' put ice to yer head an' a mustard plaster to yer feet, tell you git down to whar you don't blow the packin' out o' your steam-chist. Ef you do find your gruel hot, you sha'n't spew it in *my* face!"

This was said so coolly, that it, of itself, lowered the colonel's temperature considerably. He had not expected to be brought up so short by so loutish-looking a fellow as Tow-head Ted.

He stored; and Ted stood quietly submitting to his inspection.

Impatient with himself for his loss of self-control, the colonel turned on his heel to walk off.

"Halt!" came the short, sharp command. He looked back, to find his eyes ranging down the bore of a self-cocking revolver.

His challenger betrayed no excitement. There was something deadly in this cold-blooded determination.

"What do you mean?" he gasped, turning round to face the menace.

"I mean," said Ted, quietly, "that you shall drop to a gent the next time you see one."

"But—but—what have I done to you?" stammered the colonel.

"You've trod on my corns. I have 'em layin' around loose, enough to cover a ten-acre lot, when thar's sich chaps as you goin'."

"But, sir, I did not mean to offend you."

"The deuce you didn't! Waal, then, all I've got to say is, that you'd better have your keeper corral you tell he kin git a muzzle that'll go over your mouth. You've got a way with ye that'll make you think that the infernal regions has broke loose almost any day in this hyar camp. Money don't go down hyar, ye ounderstand; an' we don't take no back slack from nobody."

"But what more can I do? I have said—"

"You git down on yer marrerbones, thar in the dirt, an' you axes my pardon, an' you do it as purty as you know how—that's what you do!"

All the colonel's pride revolted at this demand. What! be so humiliated by such a specimen of humanity as this shock-headed ruffian?

"Blow me," growled Ted, "ef I hain't half a mind to march you into camp, an' down you in front o' the Inter-ocean! The boys hain't had no fun fur a dog's age; an' it would be a godsend to 'em."

Colonel Wallingford had seen enough of these fellows to know that they were set to a hair trigger, and that it was only the balancing of a whim that would determine the action of the man before him.

Drawing his breath hard between set teeth, and swallowing the lump of rage that swelled in his throat, he dropped on his knees in the dust, and said:

"I beg your pardon!"

"Waal, I'll swar!" said Ted, "ef they have many sich men as you be down to the Bay, it's a dog-cheap place, fur a fact! Now you git up an' git!—an' the next time you see a gentleman, you take off yer hat."

Shaking with rage and fear, the unhappy millionaire slunk off.

Tow-head Ted turned and walked coolly back to the camp. And this was the man who trembled before a woman's slightest word! But put his antagonist before him in boots and breeches, and he was "thar, every time!"

Colonel Wallingford was in no mood to return to the camp immediately. He would have imagined a broad grin on every face that he met.

He went further away, to be alone where he could think out this new complication.

The insolence, as he called it, of Whisky Skin's messenger made the bumper himself appear all the more menacing. They must be sure of their power, to assail him so boldly.

Could he and Gower have been mistaken as to the emotion with which Whisky Skin had shrunk from him? His pallor might have been that of rage at discovering the true personality of the proprietor of the Lucky Venture.

Now for the first time the colonel realized how delicate a position he was in. If he were lifted up before the public gaze on a criminal charge, how could he explain satisfactorily the fact that he had been in disguise for sixteen years?

"What a miserable fool, to venture to this doubly accursed spot!" he groaned.

But the mischief had been done. The crisis of his life was at hand. Could he meet it?

He was not left long to plan. In the midst of his dilemma he was startled once more by a sharp:

"Hist!"

Starting, as if from the warning of a serpent, he discovered a man beckoning to him from the cover of a clump of bushes.

The fellow was roughly dressed and armed like a brigand, besides having his face hidden behind a black mask.

From his actions there could be no doubt of his stealth. He did not wish to be seen from the camp.

Thoroughly alarmed, Colonel Wallingford began to retreat backward, without responding to this strange overture. What sort of a country was this, where some sort of menace lurked in every covert?

But he was not to be let off so easily.

"Halt!" came the prompt command.

And once more the black muzzle of a "pocket bull-dog" frowned upon him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NEFARIOUS BARGAIN.

Colonel Wallingford stopped in helpless despair.

"Advance!"

He walked forward like a victim under the spell of fascination.

"Look a-hyar, boss," said the mysterious stranger, when he stopped quite close to him, "ef you 'low as how Tow-head Ted is the only business man in this hyar community, you'll mighty soon find that you're a long ways out."

"What do you want with me?" asked the victim.

"Fur a starter, I want you to toe the mark when I give ye a tip. Secondly, you take this hyar bridle-path, an' you keep a-goin' till I tell ye to stop."

"But where are you leading me to? If you are an honest man, show your face and state your business—"

"Honest! Honest! Haw! haw! haw! What use would an honest man have for the like of you? But I'll tell ye what I am, my Christian friend. I'm a man o' my word; an' when I say git once! git twice! then, you bet yer sweet life, git-three-times means feet-first, with a string o' mourners, b'jing! as long as the Serpentine Flume!"

Hopeless of successfully answering this kind of eloquence, the colonel stepped into the path and preceded the masked ruffian until they had reached a spot where there was no danger of an observer of their interview.

"Waal, boss, hyar we air, an' no bones broke," said the stranger, seating himself carelessly on a boulder and swinging his leg as he talked. "Now, I ounderstand you to be the gent as has offered a reward fur Old Flip's gal, what the heathen Chinees has hooked on to an' run out o' the place."

"I have offered such a reward," admitted the colonel, beginning to hope that there was less danger than he had feared.

"Waal, now, what might be yer biggest figger in this hyar transaction?"

"I have offered a thousand dollars. I think that that is all that could be expected of me, as I have no personal interest in the girl, other than might arise from the fact that she has lived in a camp where my property is located."

"So fur, so good! A man has a right to lie when he has a notion that it will better his game. But, on the other side o' the board, a man has a right to gag when the thing gits too sweet. As I think I 'lowed a minute ago, I'm a business man, I am. I've come hyar to talk business. Now I ax you ag'in—what's yer best figger? A thousan' dollars ain't nowhar."

"If you have inveigled me to this secluded spot to extort money out of me, you may as well do it in the ordinary way—hands up, and throw out your money-box!"

"Why, blast yer eternal pictur'! do you take me fur a road-agent?"

The colonel saw that he had gone too far.

"I do not wish to insinuate anything," he said. "What is your price?"

"Waal, you air a sweet one, you air! I've seen men come down easy; but you take the ice-cream, sasser, spoon, an' all!"

"Now, look a-hyar, boss! I'm as straight a business man as you ever see; but hang me ef I ain't ashamed to be seen doin' business with such a coyote as you be. That's the why of this hyar mask, which the same you took to smell loud o' road-agent biz."

"But I'm on the square, I tell ye! I've dropped to these hyar Chineesers what's give all the boys the sly dodge, an' I 'lows to make a spec' out of it. What's the matter with that?"

"Nothing, if that is your real purpose."

"An' you 'low as I lie like you do? Ding yer ole dornick! cain't I hammer it into ye that thar's virtue in this hyar world, ef ye only know whar to look fur it?"

"You have not gone to all this trouble for the sake of idle insult. State your business."

"That's just what I done. What's the gal worth to ye?"

"Nothing."

"Go 'way! You put it at a thousand yerself."

"I would give as much to see some men hanged; and in both cases it would be merely from my regard for the good of humanity."

"Waal, that ain't so bad! I'd druther see yer a mite peart than gittin' down in the mud. But, business is business. Make it five thousand, an' the gal's as good as to yer hand."

"Excuse me! I believe that it will be the opinion of the world that, in offering a thousand dollars, I have done all that could reasonably be expected of me."

"But suppose it goes out to the world that you set so much store by, that you refused a dead-sure thing an' left a likely gal to the Heathen, an' all fur a paltry four thousand—you with yer tens o' thousands to throw away on fast hosses an sich?"

"I refuse to be black-mailed in this way."

"Look a-hyar, boss! I've spoke ye fair; but now I propose to come right down to biz. I've dropped to yer leetle game, an' ye can't zwie-nickel me!"

There was now the ring of iron resolve in the voice of the masked ruffian, though of course the expression of his face could not be seen.

Colonel Wallingford's conscience made a coward of him. He immediately asked himself how much this man might know. It began to look as if every other man he met knew something of his scheming life.

"If I had the assurance that this would really secure the rescue of the girl," he faltered.

The other picked him up at once.

"No work, no pay!" he said, briskly. "You offer a reward fur the gal in a certain condition. Ef you don't git her, you ain't nothin' out."

"Now, hyar's what I propose. Jack Ledyard is a friend o' mine, an' I owe him an even thousand. He knocked the socks off o' me at draw poker when I was drunk. But that thar's my hard luck an' his good fortune. Now you've put up a thousand dollars fur the gal; an' Jack he's 'way off. He cain't git her. Suppose I says to Jack, says I—'Jack, this hyar Frisco sharp has put up a thousand dollars on a blind, an' you hain't got so much as a leetle pair. Now you goes him a thousand better—I'll fix him fur to call; an' hyar's the best I got—four kings an' a one-spot. What d'ye want better'n that?' says I."

"Nothin'!" says he.

"That settles our leetle account?" says I.

"You bet!" says he.

"So you gits the gal an' Jack gits his money, an' I gits my debt off my conscience; an' we're happy all 'round."

"Then you wish me to increase the reward to two thousand?" asked the colonel, surprised at the prospect of being let off so cheaply.

"You ketched it on a fly, boss, that time. An' fur my trouble gittin' ye out of a bad scrape, keepin' my mouth shut, etcetery, etcetery, you planks three thousand in my hand when I calls fur it at the cap'n's office, an' says nothin' to Jack about it, says you!"

"But I must have assurance of the safety of the girl."

"C. O. D."

While this scheme was being laid before him, a stream of fiery thoughts had suddenly coursed through Colonel Wallingford's brain like an eruption of lava.

"Here is a thoroughly unscrupulous fellow," he reflected. "Why should I not have him free me, once for all, from danger and anxiety?"

Aloud he said:

"Look here, my fine fellow! you have talked business pretty freely; now I propose to talk business a little in my turn. Who you are or what you are, I don't know; but it is pretty plain that you are ready for almost any kind of enterprise that pays. Am I right?"

"Hey!" exclaimed the masquerader, with a new intonation in his voice. "Waal, I swar, ef I don't b'lieve I've waked you up! Wade in, ole man! You're like dry diggin's—you git better the further ye go down. Pears to me as how we're gittin' down to hard-pan jest about this hyar time o' day!"

"You have got down to hard-pan," said the colonel, recklessly. "But I can't do business with you on this basis. You know me and I shall have to know you, face to face. We must both be in the same boat."

"Honor bright, pard—it's biz this time?"

"Yes, it is!"

"It's the ole man, eh?"

The colonel grew cold. This fellow knew it all.

"Yes, the ole man," he replied, between white lips.

"Ye don't hev to know me, pard," said the other. "You want yer work done—that's what you want. The gal ain't no good to ye while the ole man's 'round. I knowed that before. Waal, we kin fix him among us."

Colonel Wallingford stood with clinched hands set teeth and tightly compressed lips, the cold sweat bursting from every pore.

Could he go into this one-sided arrangement? Dared he put himself so in the power of an unknown man? In his sore strait, was he calling to his aid a demon who would thenceforward haunt his life forever?

He resolved to get at it by indirection, so that nothing could be directly fastened upon him.

"Let us say no more about this," he said. "I will increase the reward, and if in my judgment your services seem to merit a further recompense, you shall have the additional three thousand. But, understand, it is for the recovery of the girl unharmed that I pay; and my only motive is one of pure humanity."

"Oh, that's all right! We won't quarrel on that score. It's a whack, pard. Shake!"

The speaker rose and extended his hand.

As he did so, one of his revolvers, which his position had pushed partly up out of its holster without his knowledge, turned over with the weight of its butt, and slipping out of its support, fell to the ground.

An instant explosion followed, which, directly, did no harm. But, feeling the weapon going and fearing a chance bullet, because a fortune-teller had once predicted such a death for him, its owner made a desperate leap in a direction which he thought would carry him out of range.

One result was, that his face was swept violently by a branch of a tree, and his mask torn off.

He stood revealed, Cap Ledyard, and no other!

When he had recovered from his alarm, he laughed.

"We're squar', now, pard, by all accounts, an' no harm done," he said.

He held out his hand as freely as before; and, though "he didn't hanker arter it," Colonel Wallingford dared not refuse to accept it.

Each then went his way; and when they were gone, a figure rose silently into view from a neighboring coppice.

"So-o-o! they're cahoots, too! While everybody 'lows Cap Ledyard's a-leadin' of a s'arch

party, he's hyar strikin' bargains with the colonel!"

The speaker was Tow-head Ted. He had not been near enough to overhear what had been said. He now turned away, and, by making a rapid *detour*, placed himself where he would appear to meet Ledyard, instead of to have followed him.

"Cap, you're the man I'm lookin' fur," he said.

"What d'ye want o' me?" asked Cap, not well pleased at being found away from his men.

"A letter from your gran'mother, boss."

"Eh?"

Cap took the letter in astonishment, and read it in still greater astonishment.

"I have dropped to your little game. To save time and trouble, call on the undersigned at 5 P. M., Room 14, Inter-ocean House. OLD FLIP."

Cap Ledyard, on reading this sharp summons, turned purple, and then the blood receded, leaving him white with rage, and possibly not without fear.

"What's this hyar?" he demanded, roughly.

"I allow you're in better shape to tell me, pard, bein's as I don't know nothin' about it," replied Ted.

"You don't know nothin' about it?"

"No."

"You ain't in with Old Flip?"

"I'm standin' by him, every time an' all the while, ef that's what you mean."

"I mean in this bluff."

"Ef the ole man's a-bluffin', the which I hain't nothin' to say one way or t'other, bein's as I hain't had no sight into his hand, it's between you an' him. Go him better, ef you 'low you see yer way clear."

Cap looked at Ted with a fierce glare of suspicion.

"Ef I thought you was standin' in with the ole man in this hyar, I'd chaw you up an' spit you out an' rub you into the ground with my foot!" he said.

"That's your privilege, boss, when you make up yer mind that you hold the keerds," was Ted's cool reply.

Cap set his teeth with fury, and made a motion toward his hip.

Ted stood without the change of a muscle. He wore a roundabout coat, and his hands were in the pockets at the sides.

From his face, Cap's eye ranged down to his right-hand pocket.

He said nothing; but the significance of that glance needed no interpreter.

"You're a pretty good man," said Ted; "but ef I go slow, I go sure. Make no mistake."

"I hain't no quarrel with you—*yit!*" said Cap.

And, turning on his heel, he walked off.

"We've got you down fine, my gay an' festive marshal!" said Ted to himself, as he turned and went his way.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LA BLANCHETTE "PUTS HER FOOT IN IT."

LA BLANCHETTE was "on pins and needles." Had chance really taken the work out of Silver Riffle Sid's hands; or was this Chinese assault only a device by which he had covered up his tracks.

She longed to be free, so that she could secure an interview with him; but it was not easy to escape from Nora's solicitude.

As for herself, she did not fear the personal danger. If the Chinamen were really guilty, they would be run to cover; besides which, she trusted to her revolver.

At last she hit upon a plan. She urged that some one ought to go and see Old Flip, and look to his comfort.

On her way to the Riffle a man stepped into the road just before her.

"Ef so be this hyar is Miss Champney," he said, doffing his hat and holding forth a letter.

"It is Miss Champney. What have you there?" she asked, eagerly, at once jumping to the conclusion that Silver Riffle Sid had taken this means of communicating with her.

Tow-head Ted saw her eyes brighten with expectancy; and he had a sudden inspiration.

"It's a letter, mum, from my pard," he said, holding the envelope with the superscription undermost, so that she could not read it, "the which I was to give to ye unbeknownst to everybody; an' you, mum, bein's I never seen you before, an' it 'ud make trouble ef I was to give it to the wrong one—with all respect to you, mum, the which you wouldn't say it was Miss Champney ef it wa'n't—you will jest tip me the name o' my pard, an' whar you last had word with him; the which I've got it all as straight as a string; an' ef so be you give me the passport, so to speak, you'll git yer letter, an' ef not, not."

From which clumsy, round-about, long-winded explanation, La Blanchette received the impression that this must be an honest numskull whom Sid trusted.

Still she had the instinct of wariness.

"B. B.?" she asked, by way of a hint.

Ted looked as stolid as a post.

"That's pretty good as a guess, mum," he said.

"I reckon ye're all right; but as I always obey orders ef so be I break owners, you will excuse me, ef you please, ef I—"

"Oh, it's all right," said the actress, seeing no reason for such extreme caution. "It is from Mr. Sloper, and the last place I saw him was at Bald Bank."

Inwardly Tow-head Ted felt an almost irresistible impulse to leap into the air and crack his heels together.

"Silver Riffle Sid!" he thought within himself. "Blow me tight ef I didn't know that that thar funny business was snide! He bought Cap up, an' now they're thicker'n thieves!"

But instead of betraying his exultation, he dropped his jaw and stared at the actress in seeming astonishment.

La Blanchette saw at once that she had made a mistake. She made a desperate effort to retrieve her position. With her most fascinating smile she held out her hand for the letter, saying:

"Come! come! my good fellow, I did not think that my little joke would turn you to stone. But you may tell your pard, as you call him, that I would not be challenged like a soldier, and refused to give the countersign. Meanwhile, even if you did not see me at the ovation last night to Colonel Wallingford, you must know that Miss Champney is Professor Fitzgerald's guest, and there is not likely to be two women of my description in your camp without your knowing it. So you may safely give me the letter."

"I allow it's all right, mum, bein's as I did see you at the Professor's. But my pard is Ole Flip, an' he seen you last at the cottage; but he had word with you last in his own shanty. That thar's the leetle ketch."

And quite innocently, to all seeming, Tow-head Ted gave her the missive.

But at mention of Old Flip's name she had turned quite pale, and she received the letter with a trembling hand.

She did not wait to read it free from the observation of the loutish fellow who stood waiting with a perfectly vacant look on his face.

She tore it open without even turning away, and read it at a glance.

"GIN:—You have the wit to know when a thing is played. For particulars, see Inter-ocean House, Room 14, at 2 P. M., sharp."

There was no signature, but in the lower left-hand corner were added two words:

"Without fail."

The reader flushed scarlet, and then as abruptly turned deathly pale.

"Any answer, mum?" asked Ted as she looked at him.

"No!" she answered, as short as a pie-crust, her eyes flashing fire.

"That means fight," was Ted's reflection. "She's got the nerve. The old man 'ud better handle with care!"

La Blanchette gave her horse a vicious cut with the whip, and leaped by, almost over, Ted.

He looked after her until she disappeared round the angle of a crag. Then he trudged on to the cottage.

Meanwhile, La Blanchette, free from observation, gave the rein to her emotions. Her face became white and rigid, and as hard as marble, while her eyes blazed with the slumberous fire of implacable hatred.

"What if it is true?" she cried within herself. "But it is *not* true! I do not believe it! I never will believe it! But if it *were* true, I should owe him nothing but hate. All the more would he be the curse of my life. If, now, he is about to add to the evil, and blacken all my future, as he has befouled my past with shame, why should I not protect myself? I will! I will!"

She clinched her fist, and raised it, as if, were it possible, she would annihilate her enemy with a blow. All the delicacy of her womanhood was lost. She was a fury incarnate.

She found Pancake Pete, and opened upon him at once.

"The time has come," she said, "for you to act. If you have any of the manhood that I have believed I saw in you, any of the devotion to me that you have professed, you will not fail me now."

"What is the latest?" asked Pancake Pete. "I am prepared for almost anything."

"I want that man's life!"

"Eh?"

"Don't ask me any questions! If you do not act for me, I will see what can be done without you."

Silver Riffle Sid stared at the excited woman.

"Well," he said, slowly, "you seem to know exactly what you want; and you state it so explicitly that there is no chance for mistake as to your meaning."

"There is no time for beating about the bush," she retorted, with a contemptuous toss of her head, "even if there was need between you and me. Have you nicer scruples about putting such an old reprobate beyond the chance of mischiefmaking than in the case of a young girl? What did you come here for?"

"Is this necessary, Blanche?"

"Yes! Ten times more necessary than the other. And it must be done at once, before he has a chance to strike me."

"How do you know that he meditates an attack upon you?"

"He has sent for me to call upon him, and in a way that can have but one meaning."

"Sent for you to call upon him! What hold can he have on you personally?"

"Hold upon me? He has none whatever! How should he have?"

But there was an intensity about her denial that persuaded Silver Riffle Sid that his chance probe had touched the quick.

"He has discovered or suspects my agency in this matter," she went on, by way of explanation, "and has declared open war. Is that not enough to make it expedient to silence him at once?"

"No doubt."

"Shall you do it, then?"

"Yes."

"To-night?"

"If the opportunity offers."

"Very well. I will see him, and shall know how to act to gain time."

She rode away, leaving Silver Riffle Sid with a very peculiar feeling. Driven into a corner, he was probably equal to almost any act of desperate violence to extricate himself; but he had never before contemplated the woman of his love as a possible murderess. Love and murder! The two ideas dovetailed together oddly.

Meanwhile Tow-head Ted had gone on to the Professor.

His letter was written in a wholly different spirit from that displayed in the others.

"If a dying man— But no! you don't owe me nothing. If you would stand by Sarry Ann when she needs you more than ever before—and she does deserve all that you can do for her—don't refuse to come to me at twelve o'clock to-day. Bring with you Doc Burgess and the lawyer sharp from Frisco. Thar's millions in it. Don't give it away to nobody but them two. Don't tell the lawyer what's what tell you git him hyar."

This was signed:

"JAMES WINTERS, which is known to you as JAMES ROBINSON, otherwise OLD FLIP."

"I will go at once," said the Professor, with emotion. "Sure he knows well enough that it's anything at all I'd do for that poor child, that is as good as my own."

Tow-head Ted bowed before him with profound respect. To care for Sarry Ann was a sure passport to his heart.

Before delivering the message to Pancake Pete, Tow-head Ted went to tell Old Flip of the interview he had surprised between the colonel and Cap Ledyard, and what he had learned from the little trap into which he had inveigled La Blanchette.

Of the latter Old Flip said:

"That's all right. I had him him spotted. The letter'll fetch him."

"I 'lowed you knowed a thing or two 'bout all this hyar smoke," said Ted.

The old man looked shrewd, but made no reply.

"Pard," said Ted, his face darkening, "is the little woman from Frisco at the bottom o' all this? an' is this hyar Pancake Pete the galoot as has set the pins up fur her? I'm bound to walk into somebody before this thing's done, an' I don't want to make no mistake."

"Jest you play yer cards as I give ye the wink," was the reply. "The ole man keeps on a-runnin' this hyar thing while his toes is warm, says you."

Baffled, Tow-head Ted only hated Pancake Pete the more. It was enough that he was the right-hand man of the woman who had insulted Sarry Ann, and made her so unhappy.

But, in spite of the letter and Tow-head Ted's ominous looks, Pancake Pete read his missive with greater outward complacency than any of the others whom Old Flip had called to account.

It ran:

"SIDNEY SLOPER, ESQ.:—"

"I will give you a show for your money at the Inter-ocean, Room 14, at 4 o'clock, sharp!"

"OLD FLIP."

"So the ole man's goin' fur to have a levee?" said Pancake Pete, looking up from the perusal of this pointed invitation with a grin of pleased surprise. "Waal, now, it does me proud to think that he didn't leave me out."

"You won't fail to put in an appearance on time?" asked Ted, with a look that was a menace.

"Fail?" repeated Pancake Pete. "Do I look like a galoot as fails?"

The color ebbed from Tow-head Ted's cheeks. Was this a covert defiance? Had his plot succeeded so that nothing that Old Flip could now do would recall the fatal blow?

"Look a-hyar, stranger!" said Ted, in hoarse gutturals, "thar's goin' to be blood out o' this hyar thing before we git through with it!"

"I'm with ye, me boy!" cried Pancake Pete, gayly. "That's just what I'm famishin' fur! Ef you hyear tell of ary pilgrim what wants to git a hole blowed through him as big as a five-barred gate, jest you put me on his trail, an' hev yer whisky chalked down on my slate fur a fortnight."

Tow-head Ted made no reply to this, but turning about, walked sullenly away.

Somehow, as he put it, Pancake Pete "seemed to hold over him at chin-choppin'." Would

he likewise prove more than his match if it came to a personal encounter between them?

"Drew yer fire, my pretty little man, didn't I?" said Pancake Pete to himself, as he looked after the departing Ted. "And the old man has spotted me, has he? And he has called the lot of us. He must have a handful of trumps. But I wonder what sort of a twist he has on La Blanchette. She's wild for oceans of blood; and the colonel has a pang in the pit of his stomach!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A BATCH OF AFFIDAVITS.

GOWER was politely acquiescent.

Doc Burgess was in the habit of taking everything as it came.

"I'll be obleeged to ye," said Old Flip to the latter, when the Professor had pressed his hand and expressed his regret at finding him in such a plight, "ef you will tell these hyar gents ef you kin find ary trump in my hand this last deal."

The Doc "twigged" him, and said:

"Gentlemen, it is my professional opinion that the old man will have to pass out on this hand."

"Sure, docthor, dear, ve don't mean to say that—that—"

The Professor's kind heart would not let him go further.

"He hain't a dirty pair o' deuces!"

"Mortal?" murmured the Professor, under his breath.

"He'll go off easy an' to slow music. That's all I kin promise him."

"But how long?"

"Three or four days of this kind o' weather ought to fetch him, at the outside. He may go up higher before we leave the room."

The Professor made no further inquiry. The doctor's cool slang distressed him.

"You see how it is with me, gents," said Old Flip. "But, Doc, I want ye to put that thar in writin'. I want what I do now to stand the law. I'm a purty hard ole nut, I know, an' I 'low it 'ud be a tough dose fur anybody to swaller any thing I'd say fur bottom facks. But ef it's a death-bed repentance, an' in the fear o' Almighty God, an' sich, I 'low as it orter take holt a bit, bein's as how, moreover, thar's them as kin back what I say."

"So, sir," to Gower, "ef you'll put it all down as straight as a string, an' accordin' to law, as how the Doc swears, accordin' to his best knowledge an' belief, as I'm a-dyin', an' I know it, but I'm all sound in the head-piece, I'll give you an order on Brown fur to pay you, out o' my share in the claim what we jumped o' the Johns, as big a fee as you're liken to git out o' anybody fur a half-day's work."

"We will not speak of that," said Gower, with professional indifference to that part of the transaction. "If I can be of service to you, I shall be only too glad."

So the doctor attested to Old Flip's condition and his soundness of mind.

"Now," said Old Flip to Gower, "ef so be you will draw up the beginnin'—in the fear o' Almighty God, an' all that—I'll fill in what I've got to say; an' then we'll sign it all round, an' make it so tight that all Cain can't break it."

Gower began the document as requested, and then indicated his readiness to take Old Flip's deposition. He believed that the next few words spoken in that room would ruin La Blanchette's prospects, and perhaps make it impossible for his client to carry out the scheme they had concocted; but, of course, he could not betray any anticipation of this kind.

However, Old Flip said:

"Excuse me, ef you please! I'll do the fillin' in with my own hand."

The pen and paper were passed to him; and, writing at intervals between periods of rest, he with no slight difficulty filled the page, and continued half-way down another.

Then folding the paper so as to hide what he had written, he declared himself ready to be sworn.

"Of course, gentlemen," said Gower, "you are aware of the informality of this. I am not a magistrate. If there is one accessible, it would place the matter beyond all chance of cavil—"

"By the time we got the nearest one," said Doc Burgess, slowly and dryly, "the ole man's signature might be of so peculiar a character that it would burn a hole in the paper."

"Oh, man dear!" cried the Professor, shocked out of his self-possession by this horrible intimation.

"I know," said Doc, coolly, as he whittled fine shavings from the end of a plug of tobacco, "thar's some doubt about it in these latter days. But then, ef I was you, I wouldn't resk no money on it. Ef you want the ole man's affidavit, you'd better take it while it's a-goin'. Moreover, it's so seldom he swears in a legitimate way, that this hyar will make a relic, so to speak, that it would be a pity to lose."

Gower thereupon administered the oath, and all witnessed Old Flip's signature.

The dying bumner then inclosed the paper unread in an envelope, and gave it into the Professor's hands.

"Professor," he said, "I give you this as Sarry Ann's best friend. Ef you git her back alive—an' I 'low ye will—you put this hyar in the courts an' fight it through for all it's worth. Ef they've downed her fur good, you open this hyar when I'm over the range, an' you work it to suit yer own conscience."

"An' now, gents, I'll make out another one o' these hyar, only differenter."

A second deposition was made. This, too, was placed in the Professor's hands.

"Ef the gal comes out all right, you give this to her, and tell her to use it kindly. She'll do that, you know, fur her heart's in the right place."

"Once ag'in, ef they've downed her, then, after you've opened the first paper, ef you find that ary woman what you know now—do you understand?—*ary woman what you know now* is like or is tryin' to git what belongs to Sarry Ann in thar, then you open this paper, an' you first try to head off that woman by showin' her this paper; an' ef she drops it, well an' good; but ef she don't drop it, then you put this paper in the courts, an' you fight it fur all it's worth."

But, to make sure that this somewhat complicated proceeding should not miscarry, Old Flip dictated his wishes while Gower wrote out all the contingencies clearly on the outside of the envelope.

"An' now, while I've got my hand in," said the old man, with a grin, "I'll try yer patience while I make out one more o' these hyar things."

As before, this was given to the Professor.

"Ef I slip away onexpected, like, before you git Sarry Ann back, you give this hyar paper to Brown. Brown's the boy! Brown'll see you through!"

"An' now, Mr. Lawyer, ef you'll make out your bill, I'll put my fist to it. You're a modest crowd, you lawyers be; an' fur your encouragement I'll say, put in the figgers to suit yerself. I'll never have no use for the money; an' ef Sarry Ann's alive, she won't nuther."

Gower verified Old Flip's estimate of his profession by valuing his services at an even hundred dollars.

"Ef I had a brick house an' corner lot on Telegraph Hill," said Old Flip, referring to a residence part of San Francisco, "I'd throw it in."

He then took leave of the gentlemen, thanking them warmly; but when they had gone out he called the Professor back.

"Put Brown on it, anyway, when I peg out," he whispered in his ear.

The Professor left the room with a comical look of bewilderment on his face. His simple life seemed suddenly to have become involved in an atmosphere of intrigue. What was going on about him? Was Sarry Ann no longer the unpretentious little maiden of his affections, but now some mysterious personage who had rights to be enforced in the courts? In any event, he determined to stand by her against all the world, if need be.

CHAPTER XXXI.

OLD FLIP'S LEVEE.

LA BLANCHETTE found Tow-head Ted acting as master of ceremonies at Old Flip's levee.

Assigning her to a seat at the foot of the bunk in which the old bumner lay curled up, he walked to a chair beside the head of the bunk, and sat down with his back to the window.

While his back was toward her, La Blanchette said to Old Flip, in her most dulcet tones: "My poor man, I am truly sorry to see you suffering like this, not to speak of the calamity which has befallen your unfortunate daughter. I have brought you a few flowers and many good wishes from your friends at the cottage. May I try to cheer you up a bit?"

But while she spoke thus, she darted a look of angry inquiry at the object of her tender sympathies, and then glanced at Tow-head Ted, plainly demanding the meaning of this evidently prearranged disposition of himself.

"You're only too good, ma'am," said Old Flip. "Ef so be you'd jest as leave give 'em to me in my hand, it's a long time sense a lady like you has done anythin' fur the ole man."

The covert sarcasm in his words was not lost on La Blanchette; but as Tow-head Ted had now faced round, her countenance wore the most approved look of gentle compassion. And nothing could have surpassed the grace with which she stepped forward and gave him the flowers.

As he took them, his hand touched hers. She shuddered, and drew hers back hastily, in spite of herself.

Old Flip smiled like a malicious old satyr.

Meanwhile, she was surprised to see Tow-head Ted going through an odd proceeding.

He deliberately plugged up his ears with wads of raw cotton, and then throwing one leg carelessly over the other, and hitching one of his revolvers round so that it rested in his lap, settled himself into a comfortable position to sit out her visit.

"This hyar," said Old Flip, in explanation, "is my bull-dog. You will see that I have a way o' my own o' muzzlin' him. In this condition he is harmless; so we kin throw aside this gammon, an' get right down to hard-pan."

"But why do you have him at all? He is in the way. I wish to speak to you freely," said the actress, in a soft, low voice, so as not to mar the pitying expression on her face.

"Waal, ye see, my dear," explained Old Flip, "the Doc allows as I may slip off at any minute; an' ef you was alone in hyar with me, it might put ye in a compromisin' position. I'd hate to hev the boys git it into their heads that you helped me out o' the world. A spell ago they was so ungentlemanly as to string up a leetle Mexican beauty, what jabbed six inches o' cold steel through the heart of a rival belle, fur shootin' a Cupid's arrer through the heart of her loveyer."

The actress bit her lip at his cool insinuation; but she kept the flush and flash of anger from her cheeks and eyes as she answered:

"You need have no fears. I would not turn my hand over either to harm or help you. But why have you summoned me here? As you say, let us get down to business and have this farce over."

"Nothin' is more to my taste. You shall hev it in a word. You'll believe me when I let you into my leetle game for the past five years. From the time that you dipped into this hyar pie, I've had my eye on ye, an' I see my way clear. I've laid low, a-waitin' fur you to squeeze the boss o' the Lucky Venture dry, so's I could come down on you an' make you drop yer plunder. I knowed I could handle you without no lawin' of it; an' my idee was to git Sarry Ann her rights, an' yit run no resk o' gittin' a crick in my neck."

"But you gits wind o' Sarry Ann; an' you comes down hyar fur to shunt her off the track. An' now I've brung you hyar—the which I'll hev yer hull crowd hyar before the day's out—to call a halt on this snide game."

"What do you mean?" cried the actress, unable to mask the tide of passion that swept through her like a hurricane. "Do you pretend to accuse me of having anything to do with the abduction of the girl that you—"

She checked herself. She understood the wisdom of saying as little as possible where there is danger of self-betrayal.

"We won't discuss that, ef you please," replied Old Flip coolly. "You can't pump me, an' I don't want to pump you. All I say is this: You go to that legal shark, Gower, an' state your case to him, an' ask his advice. He'll tell ye to drop it."

"What does he know about the case?"

"He knows enough about it to tell ye, professionally, that ef ary thing onexpected happens to Sarry Ann, ur to Sarry Ann's backer—that's yer humble sarvant—it'll leave you in a mighty bad fix. I've sot a spring gun as'll scatter amazin'; an' you bet yer sweet life it's sot on a hair-trigger. You step light, ur you'll hyear suthin' drop. That's all I've got to say. Good-afternoon."

"But you have said too much to stop there. What do you—"

"Good afternoon?"

"I will—"

"No you won't—not ef the court knows herself; an' it's mighty queer ef she don't. Good-afternoon."

The actress had risen impetuously to her feet. She glared at Old Flip like a baffled lioness.

Cuddled up in a heap in the middle of his bed, he grinned at her in comfortable enjoyment.

She glanced at Tow-head Ted.

If he had been a wooden Indian, holding out a bunch of wooden cigars invitingly to the passers-by, he could not have appeared outwardly more unmoved.

Without a word or a sign of leave-taking, the actress turned on her heel and left the room.

As the door closed behind her, she heard a soft chuckle from that blood-stained horror in the middle of the bed.

What now was to be her next move? In the ominous uncertainty in which Old Flip had left her, she felt that she was walking blindly amid pitfalls on every hand.

She must see Gower and find out what the old schemer had done.

Meanwhile, she must recall her command to Pancake Pete. The old man might be more dangerous dead than alive.

At three o'clock Colonel Wallingford presented himself. He had not sought the support of his legal adviser. He dared not have him a witness to the fateful interview that he must now pass through.

Struggle as he might to disguise his emotions, he was a spectacle that made Inter-ocean Jerry stare.

"You don't look to be jest yerself, colonel," he said. "I hyeared about yer bein' took sick last night. Won't you take a leetle somethin' bracin'?"

"You may let me have some brandy, if you will," said the colonel.

And when Jerry had placed the decanter be-

fore him, he poured a brimming glass of the neat liquor, and tossed it down his throat like so much water.

It was not of the quality of the choice brand in that cabinet in his office on Montgomery street; but in that moment he could not have told the difference.

He then went to Room 14, to be admitted by Tow-head Ted, who motioned him to the seat recently occupied by La Blanchette, and, as before, went himself and took the chair near the head of the bunk.

But now, instead of the careless posture he had then assumed, he sat bolt upright, and as he turned round and sat down, a brace of revolvers appeared resting across his thighs, ready for instant use.

Apprehensive of this reception, Colonel Wallingford remained standing, and looked from one to the other for an explanation.

"Waal, Matt," said Old Flip, familiarly, "how's how?"

Then, seeing the colonel start at that name, he went on:

"Oh! you needn't jump. He's only a *watch-dog*. I've got him muzzled whar dogs ain't ginerally muzzled—in the ears; so ye needn't be afeard that I'm givin' of ye away. The time fur that ain't come *yit!* But you're a leetle narvous—you *will* allow that—an' I ain't in no shape fur to stand excitement; an' I 'lowed ef some one was around hyar fur to act as a sort o' moderator to the meetin' thar wouldn't be sich a show fur a sudden change in my state o' health. The boys is mighty pertic'lar about them leetle trifles; an' Judge Lynch might be fur takin' your testimony at the inquest. So, to save you from the chance of any leetle annoyance o' that thar sort— You understand."

Colonel Wallingford sunk into his chair, looking like anything rather than a man against whom it was necessary to take precautions; and yet he was so haggard and wild-eyed that there was no forecasting what he might be moved to do on a sudden mad impulse.

"Well," he said, "you have prepared for your revenge, I suppose."

"Matt Corey," said Old Flip, "when I jumped into the Devil's Stirabout, to git away from you an' the bounds you set on me, I took long chances to save my own neck and the life o' the baby as I'd a-trusted to the raisin' of a rattle-snake quicker'n to your tender mercies. I knowed how easy it was fur babies to git sick—babies as will inherit the half of a payin' gold-mine ef they grow up. You'd a-hanged me then befor I could 'a' said Jack Robinson; but now I ain't afeard o' you with all yer money, an' me the pore shoat I be. The boys won't hang a man in my shape befor he kin have his leetle say. An' when I've told what I resked to save the kid, an' how I've brung her up, an' waited tell she was old enough to claim her own, and told 'em to look at you with yer white-livered, sneakin' ways, an' asked them to judge between us, I 'low my show'd be as good as yours, an' a dog-gone sight better!"

"But I have come here for the express purpose of finding her and giving her her own. I did not know that she was alive till less than a week ago. Will that content you? See here!—I offer you a certainty. She shall have everything, to the last dollar, that is her due. Your comfort shall be looked after. With proper nursing, instead of being left neglected like this, you may recover. Am I not willing to do all that can be done? On the other hand, if you drive me to the wall, I promise you, I will make a desperate fight. You know the power of money. Have we not held this supposed heiress, with a perfectly clear case, at bay for five years? Look at the other phase of it. With the record of my bold accusation and your flight, do you believe that the men of sixteen years later will reverse the verdict of the men who were on the spot, and all on the word of such a character as you are, with every motive for perjury? At best, even from your point of view, it is a doubtful case. And what will you gain, for yourself or her, by making war upon me?"

Colonel Wallingford had begun hopelessly, desperately; but as he proceeded it seemed to him that there might be an avenue of escape opened up.

Old Flip showed no signs of being moved by his presentation of the case.

"I only wanted to jog yer memory a bit," he said, "so's to prepare ye fur the hint that you'd better make that two thousand dollars ten, ur a hundred, ur ten hundred thousand, than let any harm befall leetle Cassie Caswell. I've got the run o' the keerds; an' ef you fellers, among ye, throw off on her, you'll wish't you never was born—the bull grist on ye! Now, you jest go out yon, an' do your share to straighten this hyar thing out; an' you work as ef you had yer head in a sling an' Judge Lynch was only clearin' his throat fur to give the order to walk away with t'other eend o' the line!"

At a sign from Old Flip, Tow-head Ted rose and threw open the door.

Colonel Wallingford staggered to his feet and fairly groped his way out of the room, holding to the jamb of the door as he passed through.

Seen from behind, he would have been taken for a feeble old man, tottering on the verge of eternity.

Pancake Pete was "on deck" at the appointed time, and "came up to the scratch smiling." He looked at the grim sentinel near the head of the bunk with the pleased interest of a casual spectator.

"Waal, ole man," he said, cheerfully, "I've come to yer levee. What is it ye give yer guests to eat ur drink that seems to sour their stomachs? I'm a boss, I am; an' ef I can't bolt yer oats, an' then chaw a notch in the crib, an' yit go away, head up an' tail over the dasher, I want to know it. Reach fur me, an' land 'em in ag'in' my cheek!"

Old Flip began by explaining that Tow-head Ted was only a spectator, not an auditor.

"Don't mention it," said Pancake Pete, with a nonchalant wave of his hand. "Whatever suits you suits me."

"Waal, Sid," said the old man, "you know that I've only got to give you away, an' knock the bottom out o' your leetle compromise with Cap. The boys is sore yit over the way you give 'em the slip; an' salt wouldn't save you, ef they once dropped to you."

"Right you air, ole man!" said Pancake Pete complacently.

"What's to hender me from givin' of 'em the tip?"

"Some leetle scheme o' yer own, I reckon."

"An' that's what you count on?"

"Ef you meant to give me away, wouldn't you have done it, instid o' givin' me one an' goin' it alone? What have ye plugged up that lamb's ears fur, I want to know? Don't waste no time on foolishness, pard; but let's see what ye've got fur game."

"Waal, I've got your crowd down fine; an' I say 'Drop it!'"

"Ef you've got the rocks, you take the pot. Show up."

"I've tipped you an ace, already, in givin' you yer proper handle."

"That ain't good, pard. You can't take my rocks on anythin' short of a leetle pair, at least."

"I show up another one-spot; an' mebbly you'll put it alongside o' the fu'st one, an' call 'em a mite of a pair."

"Ef you kin do that—Waal, I'll take another peep into my hand."

"Hyar ye have it. Ye're to take that leetle woman back to Frisco, an' persuade her that she's likely to git a sore throat out hyar in the mountain dew."

"You filched that from the bottom o' the pack, you rogue!" cried Pancake Pete, gleefully.

"It's in my hand. Never you mind how it got thar."

"But that don't call fur the pot yit, pard. I'd give you better p'int's than that, free gratis, fur nothin', ef you'd asked me."

"I see that nothin' but three of a kind won't fetch you."

"Trot 'em out, ef you've got 'em, pard. I'm askin' 'em."

"You're a-gittin' 'em, then. Hyar's at ye! Ye're a-holdin' a dog-gone sight too many confabs with Cap Ledyard, when you an' him both had order be on the quivy vivy fur Chinese sign. Hey, boss! savy? Is that a plenty?"

"I ain't no hog. You hold over me. It's your say. What's the word?"

"Drop it!"

"Air you timin' us?"

"A full string less two."

"Forty-eight buttons?"

"That's the allowance. Ye see I ain't in no hurry, because I'm sure o' my game."

"Good enough. When ye're ready, let 'er go!"

Pancake Pete rose, and glanced at Tow-head Ted, who was faithfully keeping watch and ward.

"Boss," he said to Old Flip, "you'd orter put him on a tin-type—two fur a quarter!"

"You hev good reason to remember Tow-head Ted without no sich keepsake, pard."

"I reckon."

And without any more definite explanation, Pancake Pete bowed himself out, with a smile and a wink.

Quite different was Cap Ledyard's humor, when he presented himself. He stood upon his feet throughout the interview, watching his foes with the sullen alertness of a wolf at bay.

He believed that his position in the camp would turn upon his ability to silence these men before they "peached" on him.

He kept his hand within instant reach of the butt of his revolver; but, instead of admitting him as he had the others, and giving him a chance to put a bullet through his back, Tow-head Ted had got Old Flip to call to him to enter; so that, on crossing the threshold, he had found the bull-dog on guard; and now he was too shrewd to undervalue him as an enemy.

"Cut it short, boss!" he growled, when Old Flip explained to him Ted's part in the interview.

"I'll give it to you all in a lump, ef that's to yer likin'."

"That's the way I take mine, when I kin git it."

"I've got onto yer leetle racket—you, an' the colonel, an'—Pancake Pete!"

Old Flip accompanied the last name, after a pause to attract attention to it, with a significant wink.

"The deuce ye have!" snarled Cap, with pretended incredulity.

"Ef you don't believe it, you jest stand yer hand, an' play away."

"What air you tryin' to git through ye?"

"Cap, this hyar ain't no time fur a bluff. I've seen in yer hand. That leetle Chinese snide ain't no go. You takes my gal out'n yer pocket, an' you sets her squar' on her feet, warranted in good condition, in this hyar room, in forty-eight hours, ur you'll climb a tree."

"You think you're Jerusalem, don't ye?" growled Cap, with the suppressed ferocity of a cinnamon bear, crouching in the hole that he has dug for himself in which to await the onset of a bull.

"I think I've said all I've got to say," replied Flip.

"Then I'm on the move!" was the retort.

And without more ado Cap stalked out of the room.

"Short an' sweet, like a donkey's gallop!" chuckled old Flip.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE EARTHQUAKE.

LA BLANCHETTE countermanded her direction to Pancake Pete—a needless precaution.

Tow-head Ted sat on guard during the night, so that even Cap Ledyard lost the time spent in watching for the chance to "put the old man out of his misery."

Gerald, fairly beside himself, was yet away in the mountains.

Nora, who had wept all the previous night and day, fell into the stupor of utter exhaustion, only to start out of some horrible nightmare.

La Blanchette found the uncertainty of her fate so uncomfortable a bed-fellow, that she lay with wide-open eyes, staring into the darkness.

The Professor, wakeful through his sympathies, got peaceful "cat naps."

Colonel Wallingford walked the floor all night long, like a restless ghost.

Pancake Pete had a gambler's nonchalance. With a margin of forty-eight hours, he did not trouble himself about Old Flip's "spring-gun."

Gower slept "like a top." He had neither sympathies nor fears to disturb him.

The morning of the next day passed without incident.

La Blanchette, after exhausting her ingenuity, had yet failed of a device by which she could, without compromising herself, draw from Gower what Old Flip had hinted at so darkly.

Finally she took her cue from seeing the lawyer and his client moving about the works of the now silenced mine, whither Gower had fairly dragged the colonel, to keep him from going mad with solitary brooding.

"Dear Mr. Fitzgerald," she said, taking the Professor carelessly by the arm, "something must be done to rouse Nora; and indeed we all need diversion from our sad thoughts during this terrible suspense. Suppose you invite Colonel Wallingford to dinner, and then let us all go down into the mine this afternoon? It will not be a very enjoyable affair; but it will at least give us employment."

It was enough to make it appear that the scheme was for Nora's benefit, to enlist her father's hearty concurrence.

Gower, as before, overcame Colonel Wallingford's reluctance to go among people who might read the secret of his demoralization; but, when he had accepted the invitation to dinner, La Blanchette had a still harder fight to induce him to be of the party to descend into the mine.

But the more he resisted, the more determined she became to get at the reason of this strange aversion; and she had the wit to put him in the dilemma of going, or refusing to lend himself to Nora's need. So she carried the day.

Just about dinner-time Gerald returned with a lot of the men, to eat the first mouthful that had passed his lips since the tragedy, and to snatch an hour's sleep before setting out again.

He lay down on the outside of his bed in a darkened room; but the moment his head touched the pillow, his feverish brain became the theater of such a pandemonium of horrors that he was driven to seek companionship in the room below where the others were assembled.

There he cast himself upon a lounge, but could not close his eyes.

When the others were ready to go to the mine, he could not face the horror of being left alone; on the other hand, he could not ask his exhausted men to follow him out again before they had fairly entered upon the repose which all so sorely needed.

"Come with us," said La Blanchette. "What you need, even more than sleep, is a break in this one train of thought."

So they all set out together.

"How very strange everything seems," observed the actress, when they were out of doors.

"There's a storm brewing," observed the Professor. "And I shouldn't wonder if it were of

unusual violence. The sky doesn't look like that for nothing."

It was indeed like copper; and the air, so dead that not a leaf stirred, oppressed the lungs as if it were impregnated with the fumes of sulphur. The silence of the stamp-mill too added to the funereal impression.

In silence they went to the shaft-house, and so descended into the mine. Then La Blanchette roused herself and strove to break the spell. Gower lent himself to her purpose; and the Professor strove bravely to second their efforts, though his heart ached.

Nora followed listlessly wherever led. Gerald made a determined effort to master his emotions, and addressed himself to the task of showing and explaining everything to his guest.

The event proved the wisdom of La Blanchette's prediction. This mechanical occupation did soothe him.

But a second result was that he thus cut off all chance of a *tete-a-tete* interview with Gower.

Abandoning this project, La Blanchette gave herself so a covert observation of Colonel Wallingford.

He acted like a man who, with nerves completely shattered, is ever on the alert for some nameless horror. Cowering and shivering, in spite of an evident effort at self-control, he kept in the midst of the party, as if for protection, peering before and behind and into every gallery that they passed.

Finally, when they had turned and were on their way out, La Blanchette said:

"But you haven't shown me where you made your first lucky strike."

"That was where your unfortunate relative met his fate," said Gerald; "and I thought—"

"Of course you did," interrupted the actress. "Everybody thinks that way. But do you know?—the horrible has a perfect fascination for me. I am well aware how wrong it is; but it is there all the same. And I have always thought that, if I ever visited this place, I would see that spot, of all others."

"You can do so, if you wish. We are just coming to the gallery which leads to it. Here it is."

But here Colonel Wallingford interposed. "No! no! not there," he breathed, shuddering violently.

"Why, I believe you are superstitious about it," said the actress, turning upon him with her keen, inquisitive eyes.

The fact was that she had seen him start and quail when she first referred to the place.

"Come, now!" she continued, "do you believe in luck? Or are you afraid that, because your good fortune grew out of a murder, the ghost of the dead man will rise up against you, if you visit the scene of his taking-off?"

She smiled, but her eyes were like javelins. Her real thought was, that he had known of the existence of Walter Caswell's daughter, and that it was the consciousness of this life-long fraud that now gave him this dread of thus coming face to face with the dead, as it were. Still believing him to be a chance purchaser of the mine, it did not occur to her that he might have a yet blacker crime on his conscience.

"No—no," he said, brokenly, "I have no such foolish fancies. But I am ill. I should not have come down here again, after my experience of the day before yesterday. Let us go up at once."

La Blanchette turned to Gerald with that pretty wrinkling of the brows and pouting of the lip with which a spoiled beauty pleads to be allowed to have her own way.

"Is it so very far?" she asked. "It won't take us but a minute; will it?"

She smiled and nodded her head, coaxing him to assent.

"It will take about five minutes, unless you find unusual interest in staring at a blank wall," replied Gerald, smiling in return, in spite of himself, though the depression of his spirits made his smile wan and pain-drawn.

"There!" ejaculated La Blanchette, turning to the colonel. "Won't you indulge my selfishness so far? I promise to keep you not a minute over the five; and if you would prefer not to go in—Come, Mr. Gower!" she interrupted herself, familiarly taking his arm. "It will be no treat to the rest, who have probably seen it; but if you will bear me company, I will even consent to leave Mr. Gerald to watch over them; and we will make the best time on record there and back, under the direction of our courteous guides."

She smiled upon the miners who accompanied them to light their way, and said, archly:

"You won't let us get lost; will you?"

The rough fellows grinned, and bowed and scraped their feet and cleared their throats, in awkward embarrassment and pleasure at her graciousness.

The whole thing was done so naturally, that no one—not even Gower—suspected that there was more in it than the thoughtless prattle of a pretty woman used to having her merest whim deferred to.

But Nora had not seen the spot; and quite contrary to reasonable expectation she took it into her head that she would like to.

So, by the sheerest accident, La Blanchette was a second time baffled in her attempt to get Gower under the fire of her inquisitorial guns.

"The very *dickens* must be in it!" she said to herself, though her face did not lose its pleased smile.

Colonel Wallingford, afraid to be left alone, accompanied the party, muttering under his breath something to much the same purpose.

"It is fate! If it is to come, it will come!"

Now he became wilder than ever. His eyes were like burning coals. When they reached the end of the gallery, he stared straight before him with chattering teeth.

"Why," exclaimed La Blanchette, upon examining the end of the drift, "that can't be the natural rock. It has been stoned up."

"Yes," replied Gerald. "When that part of the mine was exhausted the superintendent took it into his head to wall it out."

"Why?"

"I can't imagine, unless it was that the miners were superstitious about it. They sometimes get such notions. Faith, for the most part they're not so much afraid of sending a man out of the world as of having him come back to them! But it was before my time."

"By the way, this is not the exact spot. It's about a rod on the other side, I'm told."

A momentary silence followed this explanation, in which all looked with feelings of repulsion at the wall that shut in the mystery beyond.

Then suddenly every face blanched with wild alarm.

"Father!" cried Nora, in terror.

He to whom she appealed put his arm about her, standing firm in the heroism of a great soul.

La Blanchette felt as if the earth suddenly sunk under her feet, while she was thrown with considerable violence against the side of the passage.

At the same time the cavern resounded with a rumbling, roaring, wailing thunder of sound like to nothing that she had ever heard before.

Then came a crash close at hand, a rush of cold wind down the corridor and a hail of flying stones.

There was no need for explanation. Every one knew that they were experiencing an earthquake. They knew, too, that stone had fallen. Where? how much?—who dared guess? They might already be entombed alive! At any instant the hundreds of feet of rock overhead might descend and crush them all into a mere quivering pulp!

A moment of awful silence followed. They were struck dumb.

Then from end to end the corridor was pierced with a shriek, as if an arrow of sound had been shot through it.

It was a woman's voice. There could be no mistaking that. La Blanchette thought of Nora. But the girl was there beside her, cowering within her father's arms, with her face hidden on his breast.

As she scrambled to her feet the actress saw this and also that the men, instead of springing valiantly to her assistance were staring in wild astonishment down the corridor in the direction of the wall.

She, too, looked, and realized, by the depth of blackness into which she stared, that the force of the earthquake, now spent, had thrown down the wall.

But she was just in time to see emerge from the gloom a woman with ghastly face, wild eyes and streaming hair, her draperies fluttering behind her as she ran, like the flapping wings of some weird creature of superstitious fancy. Shriek after shriek issued from her bloodless lips, in the rapid panting of hysteria; and as she fled toward the startled group with her arms lifted above her head, she looked more like a flying wraith than anything human.

To all but one pair of eyes—the eyes of love that are never deceived!

Before she realized who it was, La Blanchette heard a short, sharp cry from Gerald, who was close beside her; saw him leap forward heedlessly, indeed unconsciously, knocking one of the miners out of his way with the impetus of his body; saw him receive the woman on his breast, while his arms went about her like bands of steel, and hers encircled his neck and then hung limp.

Then she knew that it was Sarry Ann, unconscious now, but safe!—safe against secret enemies or open foes, unless they could reach her through the stoutest heart that ever beat with love and loyalty.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CLEAN SWEEP.

BUT before this happy consummation, the actress had the very blood in her veins curdled by the most unearthly yell she had ever heard; and springing away in terror, she saw Colonel Wallingford fall upon his knees, and with clasped hands uplifted, shriek out:

"I did it!—I did it! But the child—the child is safe! No! no! no! no! I tell you she came out of the Devil's Stirabout alive! Whisky Skin saved her! Whisky Skin was true to her to the

ast! He risked his life, down there—down there!"

His voice, ringing in an agonized appeal, abruptly sunk to a horrified whisper. Staring straight down at the rocky floor of the drift, and pointing with one tremulous finger, as if again he were bending over the verge of the cliff, and following the figures of man and child drifting downward to the whirlpool, he panted:

"See! see! see! see!—there they go!—there!—there! He has her in his arms! Oh! what a cry! It will ring in my soul forever! forever! forever! They're in the chute! Do you see! Save them! save them! Ha! they're gone!—down! down! down! That's hell—that's hell down there! Don't you see the fire? It's as yellow as gold!"

"Gold? gold? O-o-oh yes! so it is! Gold! gold! ha! ha! ha! ha-a-a-a! But *here's* a find! Why, there's no end to it! And in nuggets, as pure as if it had gone through the mint! Well! well! Come here, you little rascals! You've been hiding away down here in the earth hundreds and thousands, and hundreds of thousands of years; haven't you? You don't know what men do for you; do you? Well, they lie, they steal, they murder—Ha! there's blood on it already! It's *his* blood! It's on my hands! My clothes are saturated with it! That won't do! The boys will know! They'll hang me higher than Haman! They all liked Walt."

"Eh? what's that? Some one coming! My God! Ah! curse you! you'll come here where you're not wanted, will you? Well, it's a pity to keep him waiting for you, he was so fond of you! I'll send you to keep him company!"

He drew his revolver, crouching as he had done sixteen years before, when that unfortunate woman came upon him red-handed with her husband's blood.

"Look out, men! He'll shoot somebody!"

It was Gower who broke the spell of dumb amazement and horror with which the little group listened to this ghastly re-enactment of that crime so long hidden.

The men precipitated themselves upon the maniac, and a fearful struggle ensued.

While it was in progress, the Professor hurried his shuddering daughter away. Gerald carried his recovered love beyond the reach of harm. La Blanchette accompanied them, trembling in body but with her brain clear, thinking out the situation and its bearing on her own future.

It was plain that Colonel Wallingford's haunted life had culminated in insanity, precipitated by mistaking the daughter for the ghost of her murdered mother. He had confessed his identity with Matt Corey, and his double crime of murder and the attempt to saddle it upon an innocent man.

Whisky Skin—or, as he was now called, Old Flip—would be a hero who had risked his life to save the child of his employer, and the value of his testimony would be correspondingly enhanced.

The game was up! But was that the worst of it? Could she escape without being suspected of complicity in the plot against Sarry Ann—or Cassie Caswell, to give her her rightful name?

If Old Flip had betrayed her, she was lost. If he had not, the next danger was that the identity of Pancake Pete with Silver Riffle Sid might be discovered. Her first step, then, must be to get him out of the way.

When, arrived at the main shaft, Gerald signaled to be hoisted to the upper world, a ringing cheer came down the shaft from a score of lusty throats; and upon reaching the surface, he found himself surrounded by his men, who, when it was learned that Sarry Ann was recovered unharmed and that all below were safe, were deafening in their demonstrations of delight.

But they had a story to tell. Above ground the earthquake had been accompanied by a terrific storm that had shrouded the sun with a pall of midnight blackness, while the demons of the hurricane spread havoc and consternation far and wide.

Meanwhile, Sarry Ann had been restored to consciousness, and clinging to Gerald and held close in his arms, was sobbing forth her story.

No violence of any kind had been offered her. At intervals food and water had been brought by a Chinaman whom she could not induce to speak, though she knew him very well, and had claims on his gratitude for kindness in the past. He had seemed sad, as if not in sympathy with the wrong that was being done her, but to her frantic appeals had only shaken his head as it hung dejectedly on his breast.

For the rest, she had been left entirely alone, with a supply of greasewood torches with which she could at least keep the demons of darkness at bay.

Leaving her in Nora's arms, where the two girls proceeded to mingle tears and kisses and congratulations and assurances of mutual endearment, the sweeter because of their new relations; for it was taken for granted that in due time they were to become sisters in law as well as in affection—leaving them in each other's arms, Gerald marshaled his men to descend into the mine and effect the capture of the Celestials.

"But, boys," he said, "mind one thing! There

is to be no butchery. I have more reason for revengeful feelings than any one of you; but I will set the camp an example of submission to law. Let us capture the offenders, and give them over to a formal trial by properly constituted authorities."

At the bottom of the shaft they found Colonel Wallingford ready to be sent up with the reascending cage. He was raving like a wild beast, but had been securely bound.

Hurrying down the corridor, past the fallen wall, and on into the abandoned part of the mine, Gerald reached the chamber where Sarry Ann had been confined, and on beyond came upon a solitary Chinaman, who cast himself at his feet, pouring forth a stream of higgly-piggly gibberish that would have been wholly unintelligible to Gerald, but that he had often amused himself by visiting the Chinese camp until he was quite proficient in their pidgin English.

Translated, it told that the Chinamen were prisoners instead of jailers; with what pain, under the constraint of a pair of fierce eyes watching him from the darkness, the speaker had appeared as an enemy to one to whom he was in reality devoted; and, finally, with what delight he hailed Gerald as his rescuer.

Then Wung Fo led the way a little further down the drift, to where his fellows lay tied hand and foot. From them it was learned that, frightened by the earthquake, their guards had fled to the open air.

All this was confirmed when, proceeding to the mouth of the drift, Gerald found several of Cap Ledyard's men watching there to prevent the Celestials from escaping.

They were surprised and captured without resistance. Seeing that denial was hopeless, they "caved" and "gave Cap away."

Now Gerald's eyes sparkled, and his face was white with fury. His one desire was to capture the perpetrator of this outrage.

Leaving the Chinamen under the supervision of one of his men, to guard their late prisoners, he proceeded with the rest toward the Riffle, on the alert to spring a surprise upon Cap if they chanced to meet him on the way.

They had gone but a little way, when they heard some one running toward them.

"To cover!" whispered Gerald; and in a twinkling the path was deserted, and all was still.

It proved to be Cap. He was very pale and panting with shortness of breath.

"Halt! Hands up!" cried Gerald, suddenly rising before him in the path.

Cap stopped as abruptly as if he had run against a stone wall. By instinct his hand went toward his hip. But it was arrested before it reached the butt of his revolver, and an instant later went up with its fellow above his head.

He was looking straight down the bore of a revolver held in a hand of iron; and he knew what it meant. He read in Gerald's white face the alternatives—instant obedience, or instant death.

Then the men rose around him; he was disarmed and bound, and with his men, who were now returned for, led captive to the Riffle.

There all was excitement. Several of the search-parties had already reached the camp, driven in by the storm.

It was learned that, while the earthquake and the tempest were wrecking some of the less substantially built shanties, and all was wrapped in darkness, the direst confusion had reigned. Men had lost their heads, and women had rushed shrieking in every direction. The superstitious thought that their sins were now to be visited upon them in utter destruction.

When calm was somewhat restored, a new excitement arose. It was discovered that Old Flip was dead. It appeared that he had died in the attempt to escape from the house; for he lay on the floor, on his face. But Tow-head Ted had gone to Brown with a serious accusation. He declared that his old pard was the victim of a plot, in the execution of which Cap Ledyard had been the chief actor; that he, Ted, had given Old Flip the "points" which enabled him to "spot" Cap; that they had "called" Cap; and, finally, that he had seen Cap running away from the vicinity of the Inter-ocean House just after the storm had passed its height. Ted had been momentarily away from his charge; and this, he declared, together with the confusion, had given Cap his chance, for which he had no doubt been on the alert ever since the day before.

But before action was taken in Cap's case, another matter claimed the attention of the crowd—the boldest bluff on record!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SILVER RIFFLE SID'S BOLD BLUFF.

ON the pretext that she needed a free gallop to brace her nerves after the shock of the events through which they had passed, La Blanchette left the cottage, found Silver Riffle Sid, and warned him of his danger, urging instant flight.

Sid demurred. He was known. Flight would be a confession of guilt. To what extent could, of course, only be surmised; but you might trust to ordinary human charity not to be satisfied with anything short of the blackest dye. Then

his known relations with her would implicate her, to her social ruin, though it would probably add to her "drawing" quality as an actress. Therefore he resolved to stand his ground, and at least clear her, even if he destroyed himself.

This devotion fanned her love to a flame beyond anything he had heretofore inspired. She cast herself with wild abandonment into his arms, imploring him to save himself, and offering to share his flight. What cared she for the opinions of men? She would follow him to the ends of the earth, and they would be happy together, forgetful of all else.

But Pancake Pete stood firm. He went into the midst of the crowd before the Inter-ocean, mounted a stump which had been left for speech-making, and announced that there was one there who would no doubt prefer a charge against him. He boldly presented himself for trial.

Tow-head Ted at once accepted this challenge, and began by betraying his identity.

Pancake Pete coolly removed his disguise, and stood before them in his proper character of Silver Riffle Sid. He then made a telling speech, in which he reminded his auditors that Cap Ledyard's hostility to him made it unavoidable that he should come in disguise if he visited the camp at all. He further insisted that that hostility, in its extremity, was a personal matter; that the only thing that could be laid to his charge was success at gambling, for which the severest penalty known in any camp was expulsion. He knew enough of human nature to know that the crowd would be rather disposed to reverse the judgments of the man of fallen fortunes; and so they did, letting him stand clear on that score.

And now for his business in the camp. As the prospective husband of the lady who had waged a five-years' legal contest against Colonel Wallingford, he was naturally interested in her cause. An old pard of his, who had recently been hanged in Frisco for stamping his sweetheart to death, on the suspicion of her coquetting with a rival, had told him of the existence of Walt Caswell's daughter, and that he had been black-mailing Colonel Wallingford for years on that secret. He, Sid, had therefore come to the Riffle to satisfy himself of the truth of the story. He had tested Old Flip before them all. Then Cap had "dropped to him," and he had bought off with five hundred dollars. Many of his hearers had seen him gamble with Cap, losing that amount to him. Cap had insisted on being paid before he let him out of his sight; and that method had been adopted, as enabling them to count out the amount where there was light, without awakening suspicion. That they had resumed play, so that Sid, no longer "throwing off," had won back his money, made no difference with the original transaction.

Sid told the literal truth as to what had induced La Blanchette to follow him, adding that he had appeased her jealous doubts by frankly revealing his suspicions to her. That she should remain passive until those suspicions had either been confirmed or dispelled, in nowise reflected upon her integrity. The instant she heard of the possibility that Walter Caswell's daughter was really alive, she had declared her readiness to yield to her claims, if they should be established.

Then Colonel Wallingford had come upon the scene, and Sid had conceived the plan of confronting him with Old Flip, to see if they recognized each other. This explanation would make plain to them why it was that the colonel had been so struck in a heap on his appearance before the body of citizens who had waited upon him; and now that their attention was called to the fact, many might remember that Old Flip had been similarly disturbed.

Sid declared that this experiment, in connection with that which he had made on Old Flip in the Inter-ocean bar, had satisfied him of the identity of the old man with the Whisky Skin of sixteen years ago, but that he had resolved to sleep on the matter before taking any further steps.

They all knew how the murderous assault had been made upon Old Flip while he, Sid, was in the camp. In going to investigate the pistol-shots and screams, he had seen Cap and several of his men join the others about half-way between the direct path to the Lucky Venture and the bridge where Old Flip lay; and later developments roused his suspicions that the whole thing was "crooked," and that Cap was acting in the employ of Colonel Wallingford. What was more natural than that, upon the death of the man who had been haunting him for years, the colonel had resolved to free himself finally from a standing menace to his peace?

From that on, Sid had watched Cap, spied upon in turn, he had no doubt, by Tow-head Ted. To one unacquainted with what he was endeavoring to do, his actions would naturally appear compromising; but, after this clear explanation, he left it to them whether he had done anything with which an honest man need fear to face his fellow-citizens.

By this clever mixture of truth and fiction Silver Riffle Sid "bluffed" adverse fortune, and

"took the pot" on a hand that did not contain so much as a legitimate pair of deuces.

But his conclusion was masterly. In the crowd before him, a listener to all he had said, stood Cap Ledyard, bound and guarded. Pointing him out with a wave of his hand, Sid cried, in round, ringing, oratorical tones, that bore the stamp of that confidence which comes of conscious unimpeachability:

"There stands the man with whom I must have been associated, if I had anything to do with this wicked murder. I defy him to deny one word of what I have stated of my true relations with him! I defy him to charge me with any part in or knowledge of his nefarious plot! Now let him speak!"

But Cap Ledyard did not speak. He knew that, after this fearless submission of himself to trial, this seemingly frank detailing of acts and motives, in which not a single link had been overlooked; finally, this bold challenge in what to his hearers would seem the very face of destruction, if indeed his claims were false—after this, Cap knew that the truth from him would be set down to malice, since he could bring nothing but his word in support of it, and every one would know that nothing were easier than for him to fabricate the charge that Silver Riffle Sid, and not Colonel Wallingford, had "put him on to the thing."

Even Tow-head Ted played into Silver Riffle Sid's hands.

"Boss," he said, his honest heart reproaching him for putting an innocent man in such peril, "I'm axin' yer pardon, an' I know ef Ole Flip was with us, he'd ax yer pardon, too. He went to his death a-believin' that you was cuttin' the dirt from under his feet; but up thar in glory—an' I reckon they'll find room fur him some-ers in the pit, ef so be all the reserved seats is took up by better men—up thar I 'low he knows it all by this time!"

Brown, perhaps as much by way of humiliation to his now fallen rival as anything else, took Sid's hand and declared to the crowd that he had always held him to be a "white man, barrin' a leetle hefty slight with the pasteboards, which the same thar was things wusser'n that, an' a man was always counted a gentleman till he was ketched."

Gower, too, was among Sid's auditors.

"That's a shrewd rascal!" he said to himself, with a look of keen admiration. "He knows that I, for one, am not likely to expose him, and so betray to the world my share in this job."

Gerald was hoodwinked with the rest of the crowd, and, as La Blanchette's affianced husband, invited Sid to the cottage. In that country, where the majority of men were only too familiar with the pasteboards, the fact that he was a gambler did not necessarily exclude him from the society of respectable people, provided he was otherwise a gentleman.

But Silver Riffle Sid had the tact to excuse himself on the plea of unpleasant associations. He told how, in the character of Pancake Pete, he had offended Sarry Ann, and urged that, being a woman, she would probably remember him only as one who had tempted her reputed father with his worst enemy, without allowance, by way of off-set, to his motives.

True to his commission, on learning of Old Flip's death, the Professor sent the third deposition that had been intrusted to him to Brown.

In it Old Flip denounced Cap Ledyard as his murderer and the abductor of his daughter. He had not been rendered unconscious by the bullet that dropped him on the verge of the cliff, but had distinctly heard Cap's charge to Jake Fortescue to "sock a knife into him half a dozen times," and Jake's demur, followed by Cap's execution of his own purpose.

Upon reading this, Brown claimed the right to avenge his pard.

Gerald would have had Cap tried by the authorities at the county-seat; but public sentiment went with Brown, so strongly that Gerald found that he would not be supported by even the miners under his charge.

The prisoner was forthwith tried, with Brown in the capacity of Judge Lynch. Jake Fortescue was put upon the witness-stand; then Brown read Old Flip's deposition; and the perfect agreement of the two testimonies, where there was no chance for collusion, carried conviction to every mind. Cap was hanged before the Inter-ocean. He "died game." From the time of his capture, not a word—not a sound—passed his lips.

His crowd refused to betray one another; but as it was morally certain that they had all been "in the racket," they were to a man given twenty-four hours in which to "shake the camp," with the promise of a short shrift and a long rope if they ever returned; and to those who had been captured, and whose guilt was thus beyond question, were added four-and-twenty lashes well laid on.

Jake Fortescue, however, in consideration of his humanity, was let off with banishment.

Brown, now made "boss of the town," did the handsome thing by the Chinamen. He reinstated them in their claim, the more readily, perhaps, since he had discovered that the luck which had led to their dispossession was only a streak, which his gang had soon exhausted.

And now we return to our little heroine, henceforth Cassie Caswell. Old Flip's first deposition told the story of her life, and by reference to friends of her parents made the establishment of her identity, through her remarkable resemblance to her mother, a matter of no difficulty. From the lowly estate of a drunkard's child, she passed gracefully into her rightful position as a great heiress, but richest of all, she whispered to *somebody* shyly, in the love of a true man!

The second deposition, which the Professor gave to her without surmising to what or to whom it referred, proved to be a revelation concerning La Blanchette.

It was true that her mother had eloped with her father's coachman—no less a person than Old Flip in his palmy days! But her wealthy father had obtained a divorce, and had paid a dashing young man about town a hundred thousand dollars to remarry her and take her to Europe, that her child might be born to the name of a gentleman, though there could be no question as to its paternity. This was the man of varied fortunes, who had fallen in a duel with a French count. And Roy Champney had been Walt Caswell's half-brother; so that, in default of his daughter, and but for the questionable legality of the money-bought divorce, and therefore of the subsequent marriage, La Blanchette might have been the true heiress.

Of the true state of the case the actress was well aware; and within the past five years Old Flip had claimed her duty to contribute to the support of his old age, to be repudiated with scorn and detestation. Then, the frustration of her hope of getting possession of Walt Caswell's estate, had been his cherished revenge.

When Cassie Caswell had read this, she told the actress that her secret was safe; and they parted with at least the outward forms of politeness.

To Tow-head Ted, who continued to worship her afar off, even after her marriage, Mrs. Gerald Fitzgerald was always, in his secret thoughts, "Sarry Ann!"

Colonel Wallingford, more properly Matt Corey, is in a mad-house, where he tells over and over the story of his crime, in imaginary confessions to Mrs. Caswell's ghost.

One more fact was revealed in this way. The first superintendent who came to the Rifle was himself in disguise. Later, when everything was in running order and his wealth assured, he had taken up his abode in San Francisco, and delegated the work, to which office Gerald had been appointed, in the hope of thus opening a way to his sister's hand in marriage.

But you may depend that Nora found a better husband by far, and is now running a race with Cassie Fitzgerald, to see which shall raise the finest lot of boys and girls.

But the hero—Whisky Skin, Old Flip, what you will—was "planted" with great parade. On the way to the "high lot," Bulge-eye Billy played a tremulous dirge, to the accompaniment of a doleful *rap! tap-tap-tap!* on Stumpy Stiles's drum, with a soiled silk handkerchief wrapped about the snares. But going home, they struck up livelier airs, as is customary. Billy played "The Girl I left behind Me" and "Yankee Doodle" in his best style; and Stumpy rolled out the famous Double Drag in a way that would have done your heart good to hear. And if you get one of the boys to tell you the story, he will wind up with the assurance that the Fire Department was never in such fine feather in the morning, and never so uproarious at night, as on that memorable occasion!

We wish we could deal out poetical justice to Silver Rifle Sid; but the fact is, that sharper is still flourishing, as the manager, domestic as well as professional, of a popular actress. But never in his checkered career have his wits stood him in such good stead as on the day of his "Daisy" Bluff.

THE END.

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